Burning Truths, Or: How To Confront One's Past

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by QuaintCapp

Summary

Some things are meant to be left firmly in the past, never to be disturbed. There are pasts which aren't meant to be acknowledged, to be hidden away for the betterment of those around you and others. Similiar to that of pasts and past selves, there are 'Status Quos' which are just "better off" untouched and accepted. In saying this, what happens when a "lesser" hellhound challenges all of those things, and even more? What happens when Loona, in her search to satisfy her hunger to know 'truth' up on Earth and perhaps beyond, discovers one particular truth which flips everything upside down?

Furthermore, what happens when the 'Sins' catch wind of such an undesirable disturbance? All of this and more unfolds, or perhaps more "devolves", in the sequel to 'Stranded Hound': "Burning Truths, Or: How To Confront One's Past".

(Prologue) - One Bleak Midwinter

Northern Russia. January, 1919 - Near Archangelsk.

A pair of frost-coated boots trudged perilously through the deep snow as a British Soldier ran through the forest, a standard-issue rifle gripped in his hands which he held onto like a vice. His wide, terrified eyes darted around the endless snow-covered forest as the gale-force winds of a blizzard raced through him, frustrating his efforts to retreat back to safety. The rifleman had been out scouting and was returning back to his platoon's holdout with terrifying news. His daring solo patrol had started with a dare, one which was about to end in the worst way possible if he didn't hurry up, lest he encounter the 'thing' which had sent him bolting for his life back to camp. There was no telling how much longer he needed to run for until he got to safety, the snowstorm so blinding and oppressive as it rendered seeing more than ten feet completely hopeless. Whether or not he was heading in the right direction was another question entirel—

"SHRIIIIIIIIKKKK!!! -=SHROOOOAHHHHHH!!!=-"

"NGAH!! Nonono, Dear God help me! God help me!!" The soldier pleaded through bated breath, almost tripping over face-first into the snow as he picked up the pace despite his already aching legs!

Hope began to fade from his face as fear took over, the alone and afraid soldier screaming again as he heard the horrid sound of giant fluttering wings, flapping loudly somewhere in the distance behind him! For as long as the Englishman could, he screamed for the Heavens to help him, to save his soul and spare him from the humongous horror which was hunting him down yard for yard! Just as all hope seemed completely lost, that's when he saw it; peeking through the oppressive, howling blizzard was a warm, hazy yellow light, one which grew brighter as he sprinted towards it. Towards the hopeful beacon the soldier ran quicker, using the remnants of his energy to push ever forward, a paling fence emerging through the snow haze which he vaulted himself over with the enthusiasm of an Olympian! Directly in front of his path was the log house's wooden door, the warm flickering light of lanterns peeking through the cracks coaxing him to seek refuge inside the sturdy walls!

BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG!!!

"STAFF SERGEEAAAANT!!" The soldier cried as he flung himself against the entrance door, pounding wildly as he stared wide-eyed over his shoulder into the blinding snowstorm; "STAFF SERGEANT, LET ME IN!! SOMEONE PLEASE, GOD HELP ME!!"

Like a saving grace, the timber door swung open before the British soldier was pulled inside by the shoulders, sending him toppling into the house as the door slammed securely shut behind him! A pleasant, soothing warmth embraced the severely shaken rifleman as he huddled petrified to the floor, the other twelve occupants made up of mostly British and Counter-Revolutionary Russian soldiers and a handful of civilians, all gawking at the returned scout with bewildered, attentive eyes. One particular member of the group, a higher ranking officer wearing a khaki peaked cap bestowed the title of "Staff Sergeant", stared attentively at his platoon member with a lit pipe in his left hand.

"It's out there!! It's out there, Sir, there's something out there!!" The rifleman cried with tremendous fear, tugging in desperation at the Staff Sergeant's warm woolen trench coat!

"What is, Brooke?? What are you on about, man?!" The Staff Sergeant demanded, gazing deeply into the rifleman's wide and horrified eyes.

The inconsolable rifleman threw off his frosty brodie helmet and staggered shakily back onto his feet, standing upright at attention on his weak, trembling legs. With eyes wide as saucepans, the Private exclaimed; "Sir! I'm not lying when I say to you that something is out there! Ryabkov was right, I tell you, he was right!!"

"Did you find Ryabkov or not, Private?" The Staff Sergeant inquired urgently, desperately trying to keep his own cool to avoid disorder in his own ranks.

Still trembling wildly, the Private furiously shook his head; "No sir, I didn't! That.. THING took him, it killed him! I'm sure of it, i-it must've!!"

Rationality tried to overcome uneasiness in the Staff Sergeant's mind as he shook his head; "You're speaking nonsense, Private Brooke! This is a snowstorm we're in the midst of, a-a vast Russian woodland! He must've gotten lost somewhere in the woods, went and lost his way back! Look, I understand we're all hungry and confused. It was foolish of me to send you out there, anyhow." The Sergeant's demeanor grew mildly nervy as he began pacing, turning his back towards the shaken Private while he took a light puff of his varnished wood pipe; "We'll wait out here until the French Platoon arrives, they should be here within the hour. When they come, we'll search for Ryabkov together."

"There is no French Platoon! They're dead!"

The senior officer pirouetted on his feet, gazing in awe at what he as the most wild claim he had heard thus far in this deployment. The handful of civilians too grew restless at the claim, all eyes widening at the statement. Disturbed utterances grumbled between the two Counter-Revolutionary Russians who were present, their eyes fell of alertness and belief in the British Private's rather alarming statement. With heightened tension, the Staff Sergeant demanded with calculated urgency in his voice; "What did you just say, Private?"

"The Platoon is dead, Sir!" 'Private Brooke' exclaimed again through a bated, restricted breath; "I saw all ten of them dead in the snow, around five-hundred yards from here at the crossroads! … Sir, there's barely anything left of them!"

"ENOUGH!! That's enough of your ramblings, Brooke!" The Private's commanding officer furiously snapped and spat, under just as much stress as his lower-ranked counterpart; "I will not stand for delusions, that goes for everyone here! We are in a peace-keeping operation here, Sir, and I will not tolerate such baseless scaremongering, especially around civilians! We had enough trouble and strife with the Boche only until last year, we don't need it in our own ranks!"

Soon as the scolding of a lifetime had concluded, a deadly silence fell upon everyone present, only the outside howling of the cutthroat wind and snow blowing at phenomenal haste preventing complete ambient deafness. Despite his outward stoic expression and posture, the British Staff Sergeant was just as scared as his younger subordinate, though for the sake of morale he held himself together — the Empire seldom needs panic, it would be unsightly. There was enough panic drummed up by the civil war anyhow. That's why he was deployed there along with his platoon in the first place; to keep order. And order he was going to keep.

"McKinnock, Hughes," the Staff Sergeant began to order with calm calculation, turning towards two other members of his platoon; "Keep watch for any movement out there, once the storm dies down maybe patrol up to the crossroads, see if Brooke is telling the truth. If you see anything out there, unless it's a man, go out there and shoot it dead."

"Right you are, sir," one of the men responded, the second one following with a slightly simpler "yes, sir" shortly after.

Another ill howling gust rattled the entire log house as the blizzard raged on, showing no signs of subsiding anytime soon from what the internally anxious Staff Sergeant could tell by peering out the window. Wisps of smoke rose from the officer's pipe as he took another inhale of the smoldering tobacco smoke, trying his best to keep his nerves at bay with much struggle. His hand trembled with the pipe in his hand as he lowered it from his mouth, blowing out the remnants of

smoke when he heard, behind his back, the civilians talking amongst themselves in harsh whispers, speaking in their language alien to the foreign garrisons. In spite of his unfamiliarity with the Cyrillic language, the Sergeant figured that they must've been talking about whatever apparently 'lurked' out there amidst that great blinding white hell, their body language and suppressed conversation certainly supporting the assumption. The officer cocked his head towards them as he contorted himself around to look at the small group huddled around the table. Three, he counted; a young clean-shaven man, his wife, and what might've been either his mother or grandmother — that he couldn't discern for certain, amongst everything else he wasn't sure of.

In as much a calm, methodical step he could muster, the Sergeant made his way over to the table in a few short steps, clearing his throat to introduce himself. Almost at once, the trio looked up at him, their eyes glassy from exhaustion as they watched him sit down in the last vacant chair. The British officer nodded silently in acknowledgement to all three of them, a hushed greeting which wasn't returned. Outside the horrific wind picked up again for another grueling few seconds before dying back down to its average intensity, sounding more akin to an ancient, mournful cry from the past than anything that of this world. When the wind died down enough, the Staff Sergeant turned to the seated elderly woman to ask in a hushed yet clear tone; "What's out there?"

Yearn as he might for an answer, it never came, the elderly woman's eyes unfocused as if she didn't acknowledge his presence; wilfully or otherwise.

A faint white puff of cold air escapes through the Scotsman's mouth as he asks again, his voice breaking from the overwhelming anxiety coursing through his veins; "Ma'am? C-Can you tell me what's out there? … What did Private Brooke see, what is it?"

Once again, no answer. Instead a tear ran down the old woman's cheek as she pursed her lips, the subject matter clearly terrifying her. There was some type of burdensome knowledge which this particular babushka withheld from the personnel around her, an awareness of such knowledge which weighed heavily on her very soul — the weary and agitated look in their eyes telling the confused officer that perhaps they too had such awareness. He took sympathy upon them, for heavy is the heart and souls of those who carry on their aching backs such onerous, insufferable knowledge. So as not to upset the civilians any further and remind them of the apparent danger, the Staff Sergeant ceased his pursuit for an answer, heaving himself back up from his seat and back towards the window he gazed out of while smoking. Just as the Scotsman was about to resume smoking, he noticed a fellow member of his platoon, an Englishman similar in stature and sporting a walrus mustache, silently waving him over to him from across the room. The Staff Sergeant abides by the request, shuffling his way towards the fellow soldier with pipe in tow.

Upon reaching and shuffling beside him, the commandant greets soberly; "Evening, Lance Corporal."

“Yeah. Evening,” the Lance Corporal wheezed before he broke out into a brief cough, the severe weather having taken a minor yet growing toll on his health. After covering his mouth with a balled woolen-gloved fist and clearing his sore throat, the lower corporal sheepishly stated; “Ahem… You know, Fergus, I’m startin’ to wonder if something really is out there… Something’s just not right here.”

The Staff Sergeant nodded in agreement; “I know…” he gravely acknowledged in a mumble with reluctance; “Ryabkov hasn’t come back, that worries me the most. Eugh… Bloody norah, Michael, sounds to me as if that relief platoon got ambushed by wolves.”

“The whole lot of them, though?” The Lance Corporal squinted, questioning the sheer possibility with absolute disbelief and astonishment.

“Aye. It does happen around this side of Europe, it’s not unheard of,” the Scotsman pointed out. He lightly gestured his hands to further the next point; “Like those Germans down south with their own intervention deployments. Stories from there where you have whole platoons near Riga, and Tartu, just overwhelmed with those ravenous wild mutts. … I dread to imagine the panic, the pain. God help us all…”

With a sober and tunnel-visioned look in his eyes, the Lance Corporal groaned; “Too right… If it’s not the wolves who’ll get us, it’ll be that “Lenin’s” men that do if they end up coming across us.”

“In that case, then, throw me to the wolves,” the weary commanding officer quipped with a dry, self-depreciative crumb of “humor”, his tobacco-stained teeth exposed through the thin line which was the cold, grimacing grin he wore. Without hesitation, the superior fished out another tuft of tobacco to stuff in his rapidly depleting pipe, then out of the kindness of his heart asked his comrade-in-ranks; “Care for a smoke?” The Lance Corporal, after considering the offer in a sudden bout of thought, declined the offer with a dismissive gesture of the hand. Of course, the Staff Sergeant took heed of the rejection, saving more of the dry premium tobacco for himself. As he stuffed a tiny portion of it into his pipe, he remarked in a low voice; “It’s a nice cabin, this. Shame about the circumstances. … Imagine when it’s not snowin’, you’ll be able to look upwards into the sky, see the “Ohroarah Booreeiliss” or whatever it’s called. It’d be nice. … Damn this feckin’ civil war, and over what?”

Lance Corporal ‘Michael’ nodded along to his superior’s rant; “Yeah…”

Both enlisted men fell quiet and let the tumultuous snowstorm winds scream outside, pummeling the exterior walls with what had to be the strength of a thousand men, but the walls stayed firm and

uncompromisable out of spite. Both men turned their attention towards ‘Private Brooke’, who had now sat himself by the lit fireplace as he shivered, less from the cold and more from the adrenaline-inducing fear. Keeping him company and attempting to console him was another fellow private who sat alongside, staring silently at the crackling fire with a bottle in his hand.

With a pitiful shake of his head, ‘Staff Sergeant Fergus’ moaned; “Look at this rut we’re in, Lance Corporal. Look at this. How in the hell are we going to survive much longer? In this…”

“You’re asking me, Sir?” The Lance Corporal asked rhetorically, his tone weary and near croaky as he let out another spluttering cough. “I don’t even think we’ll sur—”

“Staff Sergeant! There’s something outside!”

All eyes locked onto the two rifleman standing guard by the front door, one of which was peering through the window with his face barely an inch from the glass. He announces again with alarm; “Sir! T-There’s something out here, come look quick!”

At once the Staff Sergeant marched up to his subordinate and looked to him, noticing the look of bewilderment which stained his eyes like stained-glass in the Church windows back home, his face white as the snow which blanketed the ground outside. Without saying a word, the Scotsman peered outside through the window, catching a good look of the… ‘thing’ which stood no more than what had to be one-hundred yards from the dacha. The snow haze had subsided as if on purpose, revealing the tall, shadowy outline of a gigantic, horrific beast with humongous wings upon its back; its glowing eyes of magenta-red burning bright against the snowstorm, staring right back at the Staff Sergeant who was so pitifully miniscule in comparison.

“God help us…”

(Act I) - A Bunch'a Mutts

Morger was dead.

As much as it sounded like a grim, depressing reality to be undeservedly reminded of, it was very much the cold, hard, indifferent truth. Today was a month to the day since the Doberman-esque Hellhound had departed into that eternal rest, and as an opportunity to remember and honor his name, a gathering had been duly organized involving Morger's closest companions. One of which, of course, was Loona. For the past five weeks, the hellhound had tried to get over her friend's fate and accept it for what it was with little success. Now Loona was fully aware that the process of accepting a death would take a considerable amount of time, but at the end of the day, much like everything else, that was far easier said than done. On top of this, she had been trying her utmost hardest to return to a normal life, a task which she thankfully had some considerable fortune with, albeit with its occasional hiccups.

Abiding by Blitz's direction, Loona had managed to "get over" her addiction to her 'burning' questions, setting them aside for the time being to focus on her everyday life. This in turn allowed her to get back to work, though she abstained from doing much of the "down and dirty" side of things — as of recently, she had inexplicably grown uncomfortable with inflicting harm, after having been fearing for her life for two straight weeks. 'Burnout' is one hell of a thing, and on occasion, a break is needed away from certain normalities. Aside from Loona, Blitz, Millie, and Moxxie had all pretty much forgotten the whole ordeal which had occurred the month prior, their subconscious collective approach being one of "out of sight, out of mind", or at least something akin to such. It wasn't as if the three imps didn't think it was a big deal, rather they saw it best to not think about it for sanity's sake, afterall there were "bigger", more present and emerging fish to fry.

Now the weekend had fallen upon all four staff members of "I.M.P", which meant two things for Loona — One; another crummy and boring week was done. And two; today was the gathering dedicated to Morger's name. Of course Loona was excited about going despite the melancholic nature of the gathering, for it was meant to be less of a "wake" and more of a private party. There was however one small problem; the host, or rather hostess of this gathering. It was Vortex's girlfriend, or more specifically, one particular 'Sin' — Bee. Out of all the things Loona could set aside, the very possible complicity of the 'Sins' regarding the callousness and disrespect towards Hellhounds in Hell was the hardest to ignore. No doubt the temptation to confront Bee about such a topic would be difficult for Loona to keep contained, but for the sake of keeping the peace, she begrudgingly promised herself to keep it under wraps — at least for the time being.

Knock Knock Knock! "Sweetie! Which one do you want to take, tequila or vodka?" Blitz asked through Loona's bedroom door, sounding as though he had pressed his entire face up against the frame. For the past half hour, the imp out of the seldom seen kindness of his heart had taken it upon

himself to assist his daughter in getting ready for her outing, something which the hellhound honestly appreciated.

After adjusting her red dress — the same one she wore to her initial visit to Bee's parties — so that it sat comfortably on her body, Loona called out after weighing up the provided options; "Uhh.. Probably the tequila, dad! Just leave it on the table next to the front door, I'll grab it on the way out."

Blitz's footsteps trailed away from beyond the bedroom door as Loona began brushing her hair in front of the mirror, making herself completely sure that her mane was as presentable and uniform as possible. Such was the hellhound's tedious and carefully planned out beauty routine, one which she kept a certain level of pride over, especially in the presence of Joe Public. Gone were Loona's days of humiliating herself by hurling all over the floor in front of dozens of other hellhounds, and in was the sociable and extroverted young woman who knew how to present herself, as well as hold her stomach and keep it at bay — At least that was her aim. Regardless of which, Loona was determined to have a good time, and a good time she will have; she would see to it!

With her long silver mane of hair brushed and pampered to what Loona judged to be an acceptable level, she moved swiftly onto choosing a perfume to wear. Behold, standing idly by on her bedside table was a neat little line of three bottles to choose from, a line which their owner had set up around half an hour before. It was a quaint little lineup of three individual bottles, emphasis on "individual" as each one featured a unique design of their own, with one far different than the last like they possessed their own idiosyncratic personalities. The leftmost bottle, one which was stumpy and made of green carat glass and advertised as a staple of the perfume firm "Odoracious", contained what was labeled to be the scent of "Wild Cactus Berry — straight from Wrath". In the middle of this trio of vials was similar to the first, from the same company, but was trapezium-shaped and stained a shade of magenta. This particular option was Loona's regular; "Midnight Rose". Lastly was the third and final option; another trapezium glass vial, this one pigmented white and labeled as "Peppermint", from the relatively smaller and less successful rival company of "Odoracious", "Prideful Scents".

So little to choose from in such depleting time. Before too long, to break herself out of her bout of indecision, Loona went with something alternative for the day; "Wild Cactus Berry", something to subvert expectations. With a quick few sprays of the bottle around the general area of her neck, shoulders, and chest, at last Loona was ready to set off. At once she grabbed the remaining few essentials — her phone, wallet, and handbag to store them both in — before finally emerging from her room and out into the apartment proper. Soon as Loona stepped out into the living room, she was greeted by the lingering smell of potent tequila. Turns out Blitz couldn't help himself and decided to take a healthy swig of "the stuff", the unsealing of the cap which held the beverage inside thus causing an odor to linger, indicating its nostril-tingling potency. The imp propped himself lazily against the wall as he gasped from his drink, sealing up the tall bottle and gathering himself to chime up.

Like the concerned father that he was, Blitz began to lecture; “Now Loonie, pumpkin, I need you to listen. Don’t go allowing yourself to be fucked with by some bozos at this party, okay? Don't take any shit from anybody!”

Loona didn’t take too much heed to Blitz’s warning, but went along with it regardless. She nodded along; “Yup. You got it, dad. No ‘shit-taking’, and whatever else you said.”

Blitz easily picked up on his daughter’s nonchalant response, responding in kind with a short sigh; “Ugh. Come on Loona, I’m only saying this for your own safety. I’m not tryna stop you from doing squat, all I mean is that there’s some dodgy spunk-stains around. Last thing you and I want is you getting hurt!”

“I appreciate the concern, dad,” Loona made sure to express her gratitude; “But you need to relax! I’m hanging around people I know today, they’re not the type to pull anything stupid. Nobody’s going to get hurt.”

“You promise?” Blitz pressed with a mild shift in the intensity of his reservations. This was a regular occurrence between hellhound and imp whenever the former decided to go out and announce it to the latter. As per the norm, this in turn would cause Blitz to become a kind of “helicopter parent” of sorts, with far less the ‘controlling’ aspect and more the ‘“irrational” fear’ part.

Loona sighed, feeling the need to go the extra mile with her dad to soothe him. She repeats herself; “Of course I promise. Again, Blitz, quit fretting so much. You know that’s not good for you, right?” It was one-on-one talks like this which made Loona wonder who really was playing the role of the “parent”.

“I know, I know,” Blitz assured with a wave of his hand; “Just making sure you know that there’s freaks out there, you gotta be careful.”

“Please! As if I don’t already know that,” Loona remarked with a slight grin, then feeling the need to recite the “golden words” to further quench her father’s nerves; “I’ll be just fine, don’t worry.”

Blitz proceeded to mumble something incoherently as he helped himself to another “inconspicuous” swig of tequila, shuddering with an uneven grimace as it washed down his throat. After letting out a light gasp once he swallowed, Blitz added; “Just be careful you don’t bump into any chucklefucks. Where’s this thing at anyway?”

“Remember Bee’s?” Loona asked; “You know, the place where you got shitfaced off beelzejuice and whatnot?”

“…Ohhhh right,” Blitz was slow to remember, letting out a small frown as he recollected that evening. Admittedly though he didn’t remember much from that night, other than answering Loona’s call, joining the party, then challenging Bee to a “drink-off” which ended as half expected. Then he offered; “Do you want me to drive you there?”

This made Loona suddenly recoil; “Wh— Take me?? What if… what if they recog—… n-nevermind. Sure, but maybe don’t come in this time, okay? No offense.”

Blitz cocked an eyebrow; “Why? ‘Cause of that sentient gumball machine?? Puhlease, as if I would anyway! The place kinda blows if I’m honest. She probably charges people to use the shitter, knowing those rich prick Sins!”

Loona smirked at this, then mumbled; “Oh yeah. They all have a lot to answer for…”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Nothing, forget it,” the hellhound dismissed the sudden question, waving her hand by the wrist to shoo it away.

And “Forget it” is exactly what Blitz did, who moved swiftly on as per his daughter’s request, hopping awkwardly while he began to throw on his boots. While waiting on her father to put himself together, Loona turned away and waited by the front door, pressing her back up against the wall and delved her attention into the phone-screen. Loona’s awareness of reality was replaced with an indifferent fixation on algorithms as she sank her pupils into Sinstagram, being “immersed” in the world of so-called “other people’s bullshit”, or at least that’s what she liked to call it. Soon the hellhound’s right thumb became the only moving ligament on her, aside from her eyes which shifted slightly with each post which disappeared upwards. Just as Loona felt herself grow numb and accepting that she might be ‘doomscrolling’, that’s when she saw it — a post from Vortex. It was a regular old post, a selfie of him and none other than his girlfriend, Bee, snuggled right up in his arms, the pair of them wearing big grins across their muzzles. From the obnoxious color composition of mostly yellow, orange, and a select few pink, Loona could tell that this photo was taken in Gluttony, more specifically within Bee’s very own place of residence.

The post in question, which was barely a few minutes old, had a caption: “Here with my Bee-bear again! Boutta throw a party and blow the roof clear off! Who we seeing??” A series of nonsensical emotes vaguely affiliated with hellhounds, honey, and love completed the caption with their haphazard inclusion.

Just seeing Vortex’s huge grin and broad shoulders was enough to conjure a light blush, along with a cabal of love-coaxed butterflies fluttering in her stomach. In an almost impulsive move, Loona replied to the post: “I’ll be there. Can’t wait to see you guys again :)”. With an almost indifferent outlook, Loona didn’t expect her bland comment to get much attention — an expectation which was completely subverted when who else but Vortex “Loved” her comment. Quickly Loona’s blush turned into a hot red across her face, a bashful awkward smile spreading from cheek-to-cheek. There was no way in hell she was ever going to get over that male hellhound, and she damn well knew it.

Suddenly Loona jumps as Blitz trips while putting on his second boot, causing him to slam his head into the adjacent wall; “GAH— Fuck!!”

“You good there?” Loona asked cautiously, her eyes switching between the novel horn-shaped hole in the wall and its culprit.

“Oh yeah, yeah, just dandy..” Blitz groaned in agony, rubbing his forehead which throbbed from the sudden blunt collision; “Nnnngg.. Goddamn that hurts like a bitch..”

“Remember Loonie-Pie! Take no shit!!” Blitz hollered out the window as he sped off in his van back home, the only reaction out of Loona being an unimpressed eye roll.

Standing before an all dolled up Loona was the great hall dedicated to all things gluttony; to everything sugary, sweet, and self-indulgent, where imps and hellhounds alike can let themselves go no matter the occasion. In the most literal sense, this grandiose, spectacular building could be described as the most sinful of desires personified, perhaps even more so than its quad-armed caretaker. Now, however, was not the time for Loona to ponder on some possible deeper meaning, but instead the time to enjoy herself in Morger’s memory. It’s what he would’ve wanted.

And thus Loona made her way up the pathway to the entrance, maneuvering herself around small groups of fellow hellhounds, but nobody who she recognized, at least just yet. Closer and closer

Loona got to the entrance, passing more imps and succubi on her way up. Then as she got to her closest point to the entrance, peeking over the crowd were a pair of ears atop a head which she recognised almost immediately.

With newfound excitement, Loona shot up her hand and waved, cupping her mouth with her other hand and yelling ‘his’ name through a wide smile; “Tex! Hey Tex, I’m here!”

The shrill, prominent tone of Loona’s voice rises above the ambient noise, causing Vortex to look sharply in the female hellhound’s direction with an emerging friendly smile of his own. He waves right back; “Loo-na!! Hell yeah, girl, you made it!”

“Fuck yeah, I did!” Loona was jovial to exclaim, quickly noticing the other familiar faces hovering around Vortex; Axel, Keith — surprisingly sober, Esme, and even ‘Hellboy’ — she still was meaning to get his real name. Loona acknowledged the rest of the group by greeting them individually in varying manners, including the classic nod-and-smile, a pat on the back, to a hug. Soon after, she clears her throat and states in a sober tone; “So how are we all feeling? After, you know… w-why we’re here?”

Axel, the stockier of the group of hellhounds, shrugs his shoulders slowly and says; “It’s been hard. But y’know, we all gotta keep going.” The group nodded in almost complete unison, each one of them wearing almost the exact same expression of solemn, respectful reflection.

Esme brought a different, slightly more optimistic approach to the occasion; “Yeah.. But he wouldn’t want us to be completely down-and-out about his death, right? N-Not as in we shouldn’t be sad, but rather we should enjoy today. For him!”

“That’s why we’re here!” Vortex agreed in an attempt to raise their collective spirits; “Bee knows how important Morger was to all of us, so she agreed to organize this. This is before usual open hours, too, so make sure to thank her!”

A collective brief holler of agreement rang throughout the group, a few smiles appearing in spite of the gloomy origins of this otherwise ‘good times’ get-together. ‘Hellboy’ was the next to speak up, pointing out; “Speaking of, bro, where is that girl of yours?”

“Just inside at the moment!” Vortex was more than willing to explain; “Said she had some “special guest” coming over.”

“And who’d that be?” Keith chimed in for the first time, his speech clear and coherent in a testament to his sobriety.

“Only one way to find out!” Vortex charismatically states with a grin, then at last leading the complete group inside; “C’mon, let’s get this thing started!”

With their broad-shouldered bodyguard leading the way, the group of six walked straight through the doors and right into the multi-floored hall. A wash of yellow, orange, and other assorted bright colors welcoming them with open arms, an aroma of sweet flavors lingering in the air like a premium, pristine perfume. The place was exactly how Loona left it only a few short months ago from her initial visit, with its impressive, sickly sweet colors, and the overhead lights high above made out of hexagons. Unlike the prior time when Loona had visited, the place seemed slightly emptier on account of it being out of its usual opening hours, and the fact that it was nigh on the middle of the day. High above the group was Bee’s gargantuan disco ball, perhaps one of the most prominent staples of the interior, and highly rumored to be the ‘Sin’s’ most favorite. The only thing that was out of the norm was the long tables which had been set up, platters of assorted snack foods strategically placed at intervals along the surface, complete with punch bowls full of a fruity magenta beverage topped with sliced pineapples and oranges.

While Loona admired all of the impressive splendor of Bee’s very own hall of indulgence, Keith was more vocal about his own approval. The male hellhound turned to Vortex after letting out a long, low whistle, remarking to the professional bodyguard; “Well shoot, ‘Tex, if I knew your girlfriend was gonna have beelzepunch, I would’ve bought an empty flask!”

Vortex shook his head and chuckled; “Hell, I didn’t even know there was any! That girl surprises me sometimes… heheh, in more ways than one. Hey! Have I ever told you how much I love her?”

Meanwhile Loona was off wandering between the tables in a slow casual pace, her eyes fixated on the abundance of food and drink on offer. For an out-of-the-blue event which was completely free of charge, the eagle-eyed hellhound could tell that everything before her had been carefully crafted with nothing but utmost quality in mind. Small wonder why the ‘Queen Bee’ of partying had garnered such a reputable name amongst those looking for a good time, the fame well deserved and evident from the enticing consumables displayed for all to see and take at their own free will. For a brief moment, Loona thought how long it would’ve taken the ‘Sin’ to make all of this — but then again, this was bee. Knowing her, it’s highly likely that she just snapped her fingers and “boom!”, an entire three-course lunch! Still, Loona thought, she bet it all tasted the same as punch and snack-food actually made by hand.

“Hey-Hey, Loona!”

Snapping the lone hellhound out of her mild trance was the sound of her name being called. Immediately Loona spun around towards the direction which she came from, finding none other than Esme, with her great fuzzy head of hair and a remarkable dark blue dress, approaching her with a warm smile. Loona smiled with as much warmth in return, giving the fellow hellhound a small and friendly wave; “Oh, Es’! Hey!”

“How’s it going, life and all?” Esme enthusiastically asked as she stood eye-to-eye with her friend of just a few months.

Loona shook her head and shrugged, a grin spreading across her muzzle; “Oh you know. Same old shit, can’t complain. So, some party, huh?”

“Heheh! Yeah, some party,” Esme chuckled; “It’s gonna be fun, I can feel it! Oh! Remember last time??”

“What, that other party here from a few months ago?” Loona asked; “Sure I do! What about it?”

“Ohh, nothing,” Esme grinned as she reminisced; “Just thinking about how you were all drab and reclusive at first, being bullied by those nasty hellbies-ridden hoes — I heard them by the way, don’t worry. But now look atcha, girl! In your element and everything!”

A wide, happy grin glowed on Loona’s face; “Oh yeah? You really think so??”

“Girl, I know so!” Esme exclaimed with utmost certainty of her conviction. Without hesitation, she picked up one of the free red plastic cups and poured a serving of punch, then offered it to Loona with a friendly smile; “Want some?”

“Oh! Sweet, thanks,” Loona thanked as she grabbed the plastic cup, swirling it in her hand to watch the miniature whirlpool dance around. After inspecting the drink, Loona lifted the cup bottoms-up to her mouth and sipped, the alcoholic concoction immediately hitting her tastebuds; “Woah! Holy shit, that’s strong!”

“PFFT!! I know, right?!”

“What the FUCK is up, my beautiful party-hounds?!” Suddenly like the roar of thunder, who else but the voice of the ‘Queen Bee’ herself echoed through the building; “Who’s ready to get absolutely motherfucking wasteeeed?!”

A series of hoots and hollers broke out following Bee’s announcement, a growing crowd gathering round the general vicinity of the main area. The congregation gathered around a temporary stage with a backdrop hexagon-patterned curtain which had been erected towards the center of the hall, with every member of the crowd, including Loona and her entourage, staring right at it in eager anticipation.

Bee wasn’t one to leave a good party hanging, as evident by her next rile-up; “I hope everyone’s ready for the sugary-sweet, tongue-assaulting extravaganza that’s about to blow the roof of this bloated popsicle stand! Boys, Gals, and non-conforming rebellious Pals, I hope every single one of y’all are ready for that sickeningly sweet — ~Cotton Candyyy!!!!~”

Like a howling whirlwind which was racing at break-neck speeds, the tremendous sound of fluttering bug-like wings cut through the atmosphere, a bolt of yellow, pink, and other extravagant colors whizzing past right above the crowd’s collective heads! This awe-attracting flying streak careened sky-high before landing flawlessly onto her feet upon the stage — who else but Bee! At last the party animal herself had arrived, spreading all four of her appendages out to greet the crowd with wide open arms. She exclaims in a booming voice, her teeth glistening from the lights; “Hellooooo, gluttony!!!”

Another cacophony of hollers and howls erupted in response, an orchestra which Loona couldn’t help but join in on. It seemed as though she had completely set aside her reservations on Bee. Convinced that she had the audience’s full attention, the Queen of Gluttony began to make her opening statements; “Wooo!! goddamn, what a cuh-rooowd! Thank you all heaps for coming, this party wouldn’t be the vibe it’ll be without EVERY. SINGLE. One of you!”

“WE LOVE YOU, BEE!!” A female’s voice echoed from somewhere in the jovial crowd, her excitement glaringly obvious for all to hear.

Bee’s smile grew ever wider and toothier upon hearing this, her heart filling with appreciation. She points deep into the crowd from the stage; “And I LOVE you, too, you gorgeous motherfucking party animal! See guys, THIS is what I’m talking about; all of the good vibes each and every one of you bring every day! I’ve only got all of you to thank!”

More cheering and shout-filled celebration rang out before quieting as quickly as it arose, Loona being one who was certainly getting into the spirits of the party, once more joining in the cacophony. Then Bee raised her upper two arms to quieten everyone down, opening her mouth to speak further; “Oh the enthusiasm! The indulgence! It’s all so awesome!! But! As much as today is a party to indulge in, I would like to acknowledge that this party is dedicated to the memory of someone who has fallen. I know, I know! I’m sorry to dampen the mood everybody, but yes. Someone who would be here today to join us in all of the fun we’ll be having, is no longer with us.”

The crowd grew silent, understanding the gravity of what the ‘Queen Bee’ said in full. She gave a solemn nod and her smile vanished into a thin, respectful line, the somber appearance conflicting with the bright colors which the ‘Sin’ naturally possessed. She continued; “He was a close friend of my boyfriend’s, and because of that, was also a friend of mine. I would do anything, ANYTHING, to bring him back and prevent what happened to him. And so today, my wonderful people, let’s raise our spirits and indulge ourselves in his name. It’s what he would’ve wanted.”

Collectively, the crowd nodded, along with small utterances of agreement. Loona was one of the most solemn in the room, her mind flashing back to Morger’s pitiful state in the hospital bed she found him in. As much as Bee’s words sounded comforting, Loona couldn’t help but think that she didn’t fully appreciate just how horrible it was. If only she was there in that moment, as well as present at everything before and after. Only then, Loona pondered silently, would the ‘Sin’s’ words sound that bit more genuine — not that they weren’t. Besides, who was she to make that judgment?

Despite the gloomy and melancholic mood which hung heavy, Bee commanded it to leave like a ringmaster by smiling and saying; “So! Let’s not grow sad, instead let us celebrate in his name. To Morger!”

“To Morger!!” The crowd repeated in tandem as quite a number of fists flew up in the air from imps, succubi, and hellhounds alike. Loona was mildly hesitant to join in, the subject matter weighing heavily upon her very shoulders.

Before the party could commence, however, Bee had one last announcement to make; “OH, OH!! Just one last thing, my gorgeous party people! Today we have a very special guest who agreed to help me out today! He’s a big guy who I can assure y’all has a big heart! So without further ado, help me welcome my partner in Sin—”

A massive green-tinted explosion of confetti and money explodes right beside Bee, the massive plume of smoke subsiding quickly to reveal the most gargantuan and rotund “guest of honor”;

“MAMMON!!”

“Wait what the FUCK?!” Loona exclaimed with surprise and confusion, her jaw dropping at the unexpected and unpleasant sight. In truth, Loona hated mammon; there was always something about him which she didn’t trust, nor take kindly to. Her voice and opinion didn’t matter however, as everyone else proceeded to cheer for the newest arrival, proving the popular consensus to be on the contrary to Loona’s own.

“GOOD-FUCKEN-MORNIN’, GLUTTONY, YOU CRAZY INDULGENT BASTARDS!!!” Mammon boomed with his green-tinted wide toothy grin, his quadruple arms held out to his sides in a boastful way, his long dollar-signed staff grasped in his top right hand; “Holy shit, what a welcome! You were right, Bee, these cheapskate scrooges DO love me!!”

Bee let out a nervous laugh while forcing her smile a bit, obviously not appreciating Mammon’s dimwitted name for the crowd; “Uh—ahaha, yeeeeah! We all love this big hunk of greed here, don’t we guys?!”

Luckily for the sake to maintain the good-vibes mood, everyone cheered — that is, except for Loona. She stood there silently, analyzing the great big ‘Sin’ with a hesitant, untrusting stare. That begged the question; What the hell was Bee thinking, bringing this big slob with an even bigger ego here? What was the motive, if say there was one? Snapping the hellhound out of her train of thought was Vortex’s firm hand on her shoulder. She jumps and turns towards the male hellhound now standing beside her with a grin. He asks out of courtesy; “You good there, Loona? We staring off into space now??”

“O-Oh! Haha, yeahhh! We’re staring off into space!” Loona replied with a forced laugh and crooked grin. She nudged her head towards Mammon on the stage, still greeting everyone with his overinflated ego; “W-What’s ‘he’ doing here??”

Vortex shrugged and snickered; “Psh! I dunno! Why??”

“I dunno…” Loona said as she looked back towards the stage, her forced smile giving up the proverbial ghost as she began to sneer at the “King” of Gluttony; “He’s always rubbed me the wrong way, I guess. Look at him, with his self-importance. He even looks gross!”

Vortex chuckled, unfortunately not quite understanding where Loona was coming from; “Haha! Yeah, he sure does! Don’t stress about that big lardball, girl! Come hang with us, ignore his greedy

ass!”

“…You know what? That’s not a bad idea,” Loona admitted with a faint smile, averting her eyes away from the stage and towards the sanctity which was Vortex’s assuring presence. With her mood slightly mended in spite of Mammon’s stingy and overbearing presence, both hellhounds moved away from the stage and towards the small social group which had formed, finding themselves amongst new and old friends.

Esme was the first to welcome them back, hugging the pair of them together but being mindful of the punch still in Loona’s hand; “Heeeeyy, welcome back! Where’d you two go??”

“Nowhere, Es’, we’re good,” Loona assured with a relaxed smile, nonchalantly gesturing to where she had come from; “Just got lost in the crowd for a bit. Tex found me eventually.” A light joking snicker escaped her lips; “I swear I almost “drowned” in there!”

“Hahah! Yeah, it’s some crowd, alright!” Esme wholeheartedly agreed, staring in entertained awe at the sheer number of people present. She sighed a little as she momentarily reminisced; “Huff… Morger would’ve loved to see all this.”

No longer could ‘Hellboy’ keep quiet, chiming in at last; “Damn straight! Bee’s gone above and beyond!”

“Well shoot, thanks Pinklie!” Vortex grinned with second-hand pride; “I’ll tell her you said that!”

“I’m sorry, his name’s what now?” Out of all of the names Loona had heard over the years, none were as uniquely bizarre as what she thought had just been said. It was simultaneously the most intriguing and peculiar name she had ever heard in her life.

The proverbial cat was truly out of the bag, the look on everyone’s faces most certainly saying such as well without the need for words. Everyone seemed to have the same look of “oh shit” on their face, while Loona was completely out of the loop. She looked around at everyone like a clueless child and asked; “Y-You’re kidding me, right? That’s his name? Not like ‘Brad’, or ‘Tyson’, or something like that?”

“Eeee…Eeeyeah, that’s my name,” the bearer of the eccentric name squeaked, knowing that only he needed to answer.

Loona blinked as she stared with surprise at the blazer-donned hellhound, finally asking; “Right, so… why didn’t anybody tell me this, what’s going on??”

“Well… He thought you would, I dunno, bully him?” Vortex utilized the initiative to speak up, being as straightforward as he possibly could with the young woman; “So we agreed to keep it secret from you. Heheh, sorry.”

All of this was surprising and novel information to Loona who took a moment to let it sink in. She furrows her brow as she finalizes her call on the matter, asking with great sincerity; “W-Why would I bully him for that?” The look on ‘Pinklie’ and Keith’s faces suggested that this answer was a genuine revelation. Loona spoke again; “If that’s his name, that’s his name. I can’t exactly bully him out of it. Besides, only a complete asshole would do that!”

“So you… don’t mind my name?” Pinklie had the courage to ask, albeit timid with his question.

Loona smirked a reassuring and playful smirk after sneaking in a sip of her punch; “Dude, my name’s ‘Loona’. I can’t exactly talk, can I? Stones, glass houses, and whatnot.”

“Ah, well… I dunno what to say. Thanks Loona,” the fellow hellhound thanked genuinely, appearing as though a weight had just been pulled right off his shoulders. His thanks was met with a calm and casual “don’t mention it” as the group delved into casual, relaxed conversation, speaking of gossip, day-to-day monotony, and everything in between.

It was moments like these where Loona was able to appreciate what she had, even if it was in that small frame of time; good vibes and good company. If the past month or so had taught her anything, involving all of that suffering and torment at the hands of some crazed occultist who refused to die and his masters, it was to live life to its fullest with seldom any regrets, for who knew when that life she cherished so much would change. Still, it had been hard on Loona’s psyche to come to terms with what her experiences implied, including but not limited to her newfound suspicions on the ‘Sins’, and whether or not they were willingly complicit with the sufferings and turmoil of everyday hellhound life — especially Bee. Yet in spite of her reservations, everywhere Loona looked inside this great palace of gluttony, she only saw joviality and celebration; of peace and camaraderie. If there was any ulterior motive which the ‘Queen Bee’ herself held, it surely was elaborately hidden underneath vibrant colors and good food. A part of Loona began to think that perhaps she was being paranoid; a mild case of psychosis created by a lingering mental fatigue

from having to look out for not only her own life, but for that certain human's well-being as well. Alas, the young woman found great solace and comfort in this possibility, a smile appearing across her lips as she thought about it, shaking her head at the craziness of it all while she drank her magenta punch.

Five minutes of socializing turned to fifteen, then half an hour, then forty-five, before reaching one full hour of talking, partying, and just downright fun. Before Loona knew it, she had not drunk just one serving of punch, but two. At one point in the hour, she joined in on a 'punch sculling competition' against a succubus with a mean, determined look in her eye, refereed by none other than the 'Queen Bee' herself — a competition which Loona won, walking away with an extra fifty bucks in her handbag! A good day was quickly turning into a great day with no hitch in sight, an outcome which Loona was extremely grateful for, seizing the ever fleeting opportunity to have even more memory-conjuring fun. And so it was that internal peace soothed the hellhound for yet another hour, mingling with everyone she possibly could with ease while going along with 'the vibe'. This all came to a head when the party began gravitating back towards the stage; turns out Mammon wanted to make a little contribution to 'the vibe' in his own greed-filled little way.

The big man himself, wide toothy grin and all, tapped impatiently on the microphone propped on its designated stand, making doubly-sure that he had everyone's attention amidst the orchestra of rampant talking: "Yeah, yeah, welcome, welcome every single one of ya! That's it, gather 'round the stand towards the big green bastard! Yeah, that's—ugh... tha-THAT'S ENOUGH PLEASE, SHADDAP!!!"

Almost instantly did everyone finally "shut up", all eyes not fixated on the 'Sin' standing before them. Seeing now that he had "controlled" his audience to his ego's delight, Mammon began his speech; "Thank you! Alright, now! First off, I'd like to say a massive thanks to all ya for coming tonight! You all are what make this place fucken awesome! … Was that any good?"

Bee, who was standing right beside her partner-in-sin with a forced grin, whispered back; "Yeah yeah, you're doing great, hon." From her demeanor alone, it was obvious that the hostess was micromanaging Mammon's every word.

"Oh right, uhh.. Oh yeah, the way! If any of ya are pissed enough to blow some wads, go buy yaself a voucher for a multi-functional Premium RoboFizz!! You go get one of those bad-boys in your life, it'll be the GREATEST investment you'll ever make in your entire pitiful existence! What's that? What can RoboFizz do, I hear you lot ask??" There was a long silence amongst the crowd as Mammon paused, anticipating an answer which never came. "…I'm glad you asked!! RoboFizz can do all sorts of useless shit for ya which you can't be fucked to do! All sorts'a garbage, including—"

“What is he talking about..?” Loona asked Esme who stood directly beside her, the pair of them in a similar state of confusion.

Esme was none the wiser, letting off a shrug; “Beats me.”

“HEY, YOU TWO!” Mammon barked, jabbing his staff towards Loona and Esme’s general direction; “No running ya filthy gobs when I am, capiche?? People wanna hear this!” It seemed as though the Sin of Greed himself had a remarkable sense of hearing, unbeknownst to anyone before.

Loona was never keen on being singled out; in fact she greatly detested it, and this occasion was no different, if not worse. Another thing she hated was being talked down to in such a manner which was meant to make her feel inferior; something which Mammon just did in all of his sheer gall. That was two pet peeves of Loona’s which had just occurred, amalgamated together to create a catalyst for the perfect storm; a storm which was growing inside the taken aback hellhound by the second. Then, as if out of nowhere, Blitz’s earlier advice echoed within her mind; “Remember, Loonie-Pie! Take no shit!!” And ‘take no shit’ was exactly what Loona was planning on doing.

Shock turned to annoyance, and from annoyance emerged the desire, the need, to answer right back, a feeling which Loona acted on in complete impromptu. She shouted across the room with a cocky smirk; “Oh yeah, do they really? Or is that just wishful thinking on your part??”

Mammon was just about to continue with his “speech” before being interrupted once again by this ‘lesser’ being. His recuperated feigned smile dropped into an slack-jawed frown, darting his attention back towards that singled-out hellhound in the crowd. He said in a deadly serious tone; “What.”

Loona’s cocky smirk turned into a grin; “Yeah, that’s right! You heard exactly what I just said! Face it, Mammon, you’re only here to be a big, fat, SELLOUT!”

A series of hushed, surprised mutterings spread amongst the crowd as Loona and Mammon stared unwaveringly at each other in what was akin to a stand-off. However, while Loona’s stare was full of wit and distaste against her ‘opponent’, the Sin of Greed’s own gawking look was one with a raised eyebrow, more confused than anything else. Eventually Mammon blinks and turns to Bee standing beside him as he points a finger towards the disruptive crowd member; “W-Who is that Sheila?”

Vortex marched up beside the outspoken hellhound, asking her in a hushed but alarmed voice; “Loona, what are you doing??”

Mammon shouted right back with a provocative grin; “Yeah, lady, listen to ya mate! What exactly are ya doin’? What’ya tryna achieve here, ay? Aw what’s up, ya can’t take being put back in ya place??”

“Mammon, shut up—!” Bee hissed at her greedy counterpart through clenched teeth as she tugged at one of his arms, trying her best to mediate the devolving situation.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, Mammon wasn’t one to back down. He turned his head to Bee with a furrowed brow and asked in the deliberately loudest voice possible; “What? Can’t I defend myself against a bunch’a mangy mutts now??”

Loona bellowed right back, the powder keg in her mind now truly set off; “As if you’d know ANYTHING about being put in place! You’re a fallen angel!!”

GASP!!!

The dead silence which immediately followed after Loona’s rebuke was like nothing which could be comprehended. A pin could’ve dropped in that very great hall, and even then would the sound be drowned out by the silence which fell like a wall of cast iron. Looks of shock, awe, and horror was on everyone’s faces as nobody dared to move, the air thick and soupy with the mortification caused by Loona’s shock-and-awe ‘clap back’. Out of all of the expressions in the room right now, none were more unnerving to the hellhound than that of Mammon and Bee’s. Whilst the ‘Queen Bee’s’ own face was almost identical to the collective shocked faces of the crowd proper, it possessed an underlying scornful look as if she was a mother scolding her daughter for doing something very, very wrong. Mammon’s face, meanwhile, was cold. Cold and void. Colder than death itself, colder than the blood of Eden’s conniving serpent, and colder than the love of a sociopath. A provoked, reawoken look of ancient malice boiled in Mammon’s green eyes which appeared to have a tinge of hellfire red as they stabbed into Loona’s very soul. Then he began moving, slow and methodically like a beast tracking its prey.

“Mammon? What are you… M-Mammon, wait!” Bee tried to plead as she tried to block his advance, only to be shoved to the ground as though she was a paperweight. Nothing would get in Mammon’s way, that much was for certain.

The ‘Sin’ continued to advance, the fearful masses moving with alarm out of his way in case they too faced his so-far sealed rage, daring not to invoke the psychopath which very well may lie within. In spite of her own fear, Loona stayed still as her friends pleaded for her to flee, a warning which she ignored as she watched the towering, bulbous beast draw ever closer. Before she even had time to process it, Mammon came to a stop as he towered menacingly over Loona, looking down at the “feeble rodent” at his feet with a look of self-contained bitter hatred, threatening to spontaneously combust into rage like a hair trigger. The dreadful silence continued for another painful few seconds, before the fearsome ‘Sin’ finally uttered; **“There are some things you shouldn’t mention, mutt. You better watch your mouth, and *know your place*.”** Loona flinched as Mammon prodded the end of his staff against her stomach; **“It’s for your own good. You mean NOTHING to me, but if you stand in my way? Hmph. Well… Then you’ve made yourself into something, haven’t ya? Unlike the rest of these… *bunch’a mutts*.”**

If Loona had any intention to stand down, that thought was extinguished with his referral to the rest of the party. The brief look of fear in her eyes turned into a squint as she looked scornfully up at Mammon, challenging him. She scolds with growing anger; “Is that all we are to you? Just a “bunch of mutts”? … You know what? No. Don’t tell me, I already know the answer. You think we’re expendable, just a plaything to validate and feed your own big, fat, bloated ego! Just because you suffer, you want the rest of us… u-us “lessers” to suffer along with you! You know what I say to that, Mammon? I say fuck your greed, fuck your pride, and most especially fuck yo—”

A great gloved hand shoots towards Loona and grabs her by the waist as Mammon’s anger explodes into a raging inferno! The crowd gasped and hollered in fright as Loona was lifted off her feet and up towards Mammon’s hate-filled face, the hellhound crying out in shock as she struggled to set herself free!

“Ohhh, you got a LOT of nerve in ya, you miserable little CUNT!! I’m gonna tear out your lungs and make everyone w—ooooo*AAAARRRRGGGHHH!!!*” Just before Mammon could act upon his threats, the scent of burning filled the air as he began screeching wildly in pain! He drops Loona to the ground as he stumbles backwards, letting out a terrified bellow while retreating clumsily back towards the stage, only making it halfway up before he collapses to the floor!

Without hesitation, Bee dashed across the room towards the downed fellow ‘Sin’, falling to her knees and propping his corpulent body up with all her strength; “Mammon! Holy shit, what happened to you, what’s wrong?! Speak to me!”

“NGAAAAHH!! It’s me hand! I-IT’S ME HAND!!” Mammon screeched with terror to his voice, his breathing panicked and adrenaline-filled, a vulnerable state of him which nobody had seen so outwardly ever before — at least for most. For one, they hadn’t seen the ‘Sin’ like this in a very, very long time. Just as Bee outstretched her hand towards the injury underneath Mammon’s glove, he squeals and reels back; “NONONO, WAIT WAIT, DON’T TOUCH IT! NNNNFFF!! P-PLEASE HELP, IT BURNS! IT FUCKING BURNS!!”

Everyone's eyes were locked onto the pair of Sin-lords recreating a scene that akin of Ilya Repin's most infamous painting of 'Ivan The Terrible and His Son, Ivan', except of course Mammon was still alive, for now at least. The gathered crowd's eyes darted between Bee and her 'Greed' counterpart, and Loona who stood there dumbfounded but defensive, her arms limp by her side but ready to 'square up' if the need arose. Walking up beside her was Vortex, his eyes wide and his jaw slack as he stared in awe at the scene before him. After processing what had happened, he turns to Loona and asks; "W-What did you do?"

Loona didn't know. Truly, she didn't know. Her heart throbbed with a burning sensation. A 'burning heart'.

Ancient Wounds

The crowds which had gathered inside were now dispersing outside with some returning home, the party having since been abruptly canceled after Loona and Mammon's "thrilling" altercation. A potent mixture of confusion, intrigue, and adrenaline lingered amongst the dispersed crowds as they were ushered outside by Bee's personal security team. Though the consensus amongst the crowd was that the Sin of Greed was the main offender, confusion as to how he got apparently injured was something nobody seemed to be able to agree on. Some speculated that Loona had a hidden lighter or some chemical which seeped through Mammon's glove which she had used as self defense, while others believed that the big old Sin himself was pretending, putting on a show to masquerade as the real victim. Whatever the real reason may be, nobody was any closer to figuring it out — except for Loona, who sat there with the company of her friends, trying to ease her tense nerves. That was except for Vortex, who remained inside to speak with his girlfriend about what had happened.

"Hey c'mon now, Loons," Keith, still surprisingly sober, tried to soothe; "The big douchebag is probably pretending, yanno? He's tryna get to you, make you feel bad an' all that."

"Hah! Y-Yeah, likely story," Loona sarcastically remarked as she bounced her leg with anxiety. She thought of the possible dire consequences of grievously injuring a Sin of high stature like Mammon, causing her to shiver from all the fear. The fear which Loona felt threatened to become overwhelming, hugging herself as she mumbled; "I'm so fucking screwed…"

"No you ain't, girl," Esme butted in with a reassuring hand on Loona's right shoulder; "If you were, then you would've been.. I dunno, locked away by now, or something. Everyone knows Mammon can be a real jackass, don't fret! I'm sure Bee knows, too. She won't side with him after that, believe me."

"I wouldn't put it past her…" Loona murmured, her anxiety no less intense than seconds ago.

This pessimistic comment took Esme by surprise; "W-What do you mean?"

"Tsk. What do I mean? Es', she's a Sin. You know, someone who rules over us and probably doesn't give a rat's ass about us outside of this, this… glorified fast food chain!" Loona exclaimed, gesturing a wide hand towards the building behind her; "Watch this, she'll side with Mammon, I guarantee it. Like two birds of some fucked up feather."

Esme wasn't sure of what to say on the contrary, her eyes shifting with thought on what had just been said. But she had to say something; "Yeeeah, but.. uhm, uh… L-Let's just hope not…" the fellow hellhound muttered as she scratched her scalp hidden behind her remarkable head of hair.

"Here's hoping…" Loona murmured back in agreement with the sentiment, burying her head into her hands and letting out a groan. Whether 'hoping' would do her any good was up to anyone's guess; a guess which would, perhaps with no stretch of the imagination, decide her ultimate fate. Loona's gravest worries weren't unfounded, either, as rumors about what would happen if you crossed ill paths with a 'Sin' was a whisper as old as the hills. Some said that those who have insulted or harmed the 'Sins' would condemn you to an unseen circle of Hell for eternity, while others said that you would be tortured for your life-force to sustain their own, like a living, breathing mere placebo, then disposed of once your husk is all that remained. See, Loona had heard of these rumors all before, especially in her time in the hellhound adoption system, usually as a way for the more 'assholish' of hellhounds to torment the more mentally vulnerable. This is partially the reason why she had developed a rough exterior; to defend her sanity against such troublemakers.

Anyone who wasn't either blind, deaf, or plain wilfully ignorant could see clear as day that Loona's mood wasn't getting any better, showing signs that it could get even worse at a moment's notice. Out of all the things which could make things worse in an already tense situation, the onset of a depressive frame of mind was one of, if not the most detrimental. The friend group rallying around Loona knew this collectively, and so with this in mind, attempted to alleviate her concerns. Axel, the larger, bulkier hellhound in the group next only to Vortex, took the reins in steering Loona's mind on the right course; "H-Hey Loona, listen," he began; "Well… N-No, we might not know what exactly Bee and Mammon are planning to, you know… 'do' with you, but if the worst does come, we're always gonna be on your side! Right, guys?"

"Hell yeah!" — "A-Hundred Percent!" — "Yeah, of course!"

A collective cheer in agreement confirmed to both Loona and Axel that everyone was of the same united consensus. Esme chimed in right after; "We're not gonna abandon you, girl! If anything happens, we'll be right with you!"

"Fuck yeah! Mammon be damned!" 'Pinklie' — who Loona still preferred to call him 'Hellboy' for his dignity's sake — interjected with boisterousness to his delivery.

Such unity, such compassion, such generosity. If this had been a private setting, or more preferably in the sanctuary of her own bedroom, it would all be enough to make Loona cry. Instead of plunging into a sea of tears, she gave off a warm and gentle smile, feeling the love and appreciation which seeped off her little reliable band of friends, like pollen gliding with the wind on the dawn of Spring. Furthermore, much like the Spring, Loona felt an internal warmth which brought her peace

and much needed solace, a sense of security exalting dominance over the doubt and despair which reigned so briefly yet with much influence.

A smile of warm comfort spread across Loona's face, saying with utmost sincerity; "Thanks guys. Seriously, thank you. Heh. I wouldn't know what to do with myself without you all."

"Nahh, don't sweat it, L!" Esme reassured; "We're not going anywhere. Anyone wants to get to you, they're gonna have to get through us!"

Loona's mood picked up further upon hearing this, the hellhound letting out a grin and snickering; "Tsh! I really don't think we would be any match against a Sin, Esme, let alone two! We could probably, I dunno, kick them in the shins and all that, but that's about it. We'll be turned into a fine hellhound paste before we even know it."

"Mmm! Not before we break their kneecaps first," Keith remarked with overzealous confidence, drinking from his beelzepunch-filled canteen and shivering from the drink's sheer alcoholic strength; "Mgah.. eurrgh, damn that's some good shit."

"Uh-huh. And I take it you're gonna be the first to try?" Loona asked with an entertained smirk as she got back up on her feet, finding the idea completely unrealistic yet amusing.

"Sure," Keith said in an almost nonchalant manner; "Just give me a crowbar and someone to whack and I'll be on my way. See, there's a reason why they call me "the breaker". … Well nobody does, but yanno."

"Hey uh, Loona?" Causing everyone to turn around was the sound of Vortex's voice from behind, the missing member of this pack of hounds having now since returned.

Loona herself was especially attentive, hearing her name being called out almost like the toll of a bell — her 'time', whatever it may have in store for her, was here. The hellhound which bore the unique name stood attentive, her eyes meeting with the one who called her. Vortex looked just as serious yet confused as Loona, the nature of the way he held his eyes underneath a slightly scrunched brow foretold that whatever he withheld was serious. Before silence could be bestowed upon their collective shoulders, the newly returned hellhound gave a direction; "Would you mind coming inside with me? Bee wants to talk to you."

A fearful lump formed in Loona's throat which she swallowed with great difficulty, then choking; "A-About what?"

Vortex merely shrugged; "I dunno, she didn't tell me," he said, the unfaltering perplexed look in his eyes telling Loona that something wasn't quite right; not with Vortex himself of course, but what he might've heard or caught on to. He repeats himself; "Come with me inside, I'll take you to her. Don't worry, Mammon's not here anymore."

So as not to increase the burden on Vortex's mind which was so painfully obvious to Loona, she complied with the instruction laid unto her and walked alongside her male counterpart in silence. Deeper and deeper Loona walked into Bee's palace of indulgence and gluttony, the usual ambience of noise and the chorus of lively chatter replaced with a cold, dead silence, and massive spaces fit for a gathering left completely vacated, except for the odd assortment of public furniture, an abandoned cup half-full of punch, and the occasional gluttony-native potted plant. Further adding to the ill-fitting stillness was the lights which seemed to have dimmed by a small but noticeable margin, and the vibrant colors which seemed to have subtly dulled; it was as if the entirety of Bee's gluttonous palace had been drained from what made it so. Something was seriously amiss. And so it was that Loona and Vortex continued walking in silence, heading towards the stage where the drama had begun, finding the 'Queen Bee' herself sitting idly on its white finely polished ledge, her head slumped and her eyes aimed towards the ground in thought. Bee's expression, too, was dull — reserved, pensive, serious… almost lonely. This alone sent a chill up Loona's spine; what could've possibly made the show-girl, the party animal herself, look so unusually serious?

As they honed in on Bee, Vortex called out with a dampened tone; "Hey hon! I'm back with Loona."

Bee lurched back a little as if she had been frightened, shooting her head up towards the two hellhounds and let off a smile. Getting up from the ledge and back up onto her feet, the solitary 'Sin' scooted towards her boyfriend and planted a small kiss on his cheek, maintaining that novel comforted smile. "Thanks a bunch for doing that for me, dearie," Bee cooed; "You're such a great, big gentleman~"

Vortex softly chuckled, respecting the sober mood; "Of course, honey cakes~ Anytime." His smile quickly faded into a small concerned frown; "You sure you're okay?"

"...Hm? O-Oh, yeah! I'll be just fine, Texxie," Bee tried to assure after zoning out for the briefest of fleeting moments, though the dim look in her eyes told a different story. At once the usually vibrant 'Sin's' smile faded into a serious pout when she glanced over at Loona, her eyes shifting in thought as if she was pondering on what to say. After seemingly coming to a silent conclusion, Bee turned

back towards Vortex and requested; “Would you be a good boy and wait for us outside? Loona and I need to talk in… privacy.”

“I… Uhm.. S-Sure, yeah! O-Okay,” Vortex smiled with compliance, the urge to insist he stay to look out for his girlfriend’s mental health a temptation which he fought hard against, wanting to please his affectionately-dubbed “honey cakes”. Without another word and a silent nod of “you’ll be okay” to Loona, Vortex left both her and Bee to their own devices, making echoey footfall in a brisk walk back towards the main entrance. And now, both ‘Sin’ and hellhound were alone.

Things took a serious turn as Bee approached Loona, her face possessing a troubled look which stunned the hellhound having to bear witness to it. Of course considering the circumstances, Loona couldn’t help but ask; “I-Is everything okay?”

Bee didn’t respond immediately, her eyes shifting behind Loona’s back as though checking to see if they were complete and utterly alone. After confirming to herself that the pair of them were the only ones present, the ‘Sin’ quietly said; “I hope so.”

Now this choice of words was enough to heighten Loona’s concern; “What’s that supposed to mean?” She asked promptly, angling her head away from Bee while maintaining eye contact.

A gruff sigh slipped out of Bee’s mouth before she stated with a shake of her head; “You’re kidding me... Don’t you realize what you said, the gravity of it? How dangerous it is to mention something like that in front of us?”

“Wwwwhich part? The calling him a ‘sellout’ part, or…?” Loona asked with emerging confusion, trying her hardest to not mention the actual pressing issue.

Bee rubbed her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut from the tension, abruptly exclaiming; “Girl, come on now. I know for a fact you’re not stupid. You know exactly what ‘part’ I’m talking about, quit playing dumb with me. This is deadly serious.”

“Ooooh, yeah. That part…” Loona squeaked as she feigned being surprised, fidgeting her hands a little. She came up with an impromptu defense; “Yeah maybe I shouldn’t have said that. I-I’m sorry, okay? It was a “heat of the moment” thing, and I wasn’t thinking, but I didn’t mean to—”

“It doesn’t matter if you meant to say it or not, Loona,” Bee interrupted in a firm but understanding tone; “You still said it. That’s the problem here. If you had said that to Mammon without me being here, he would’ve actually ripped your lungs out! You’re extremely lucky that I was there, or else you’d be dead by now. You understand where I’m coming from, right??”

“Yeah yeah, I do! I promise!” Loona was enthusiastic to assure, putting her hands up; “And I’m sorry! I’m so sorry for even mentioning it! It won’t happen again, I promise.”

Bee just shook her head as she exhaled sharply from mental as well as physical exhaustion, folding all four of her arms together. Mammon was already a handful for Joe Public to deal with, and Loona could only wonder with disdain how much more of a pain he would be to tolerate if she was a ‘Sin’ herself. Perhaps the fantasized grandeur of ‘power’ and ruling over the rings of Hell wasn’t all that it was glorified to be by Loona’s fellow “lessers”. In a telltale sign of just how much Bee was affected by the explosive episode, she began lightly pacing in a line, heading towards one of the tables to pour herself a serving of beelzepunch. Loona watched Bee pour herself a serving of punch with a noticeably shaky hand, her back turned towards the hellhound present as she took a reserved, calculated sip.

It was an excruciatingly long couple of ticks waiting for the pensive embodiment of ‘Gluttony’ to continue, but eventually it came. With her back still turned towards Loona, Bee asked; “Do you know exactly what happened to us that day, during the rebellion?”

Loona blinked as she thought carefully about her answer; “Uh… N-No? I mean, other than you rebelled against the ‘big guy’ up there, I guess not.”

“That’s right. Yup. That’s the gist of it, I suppose.” Bee did a small pirouette and nodded softly, entering into a provoked state of serious reflection. She took another sip of her drink; “It’s been thousands and thousands of years since that whole goddamn thing happened, we’ve all pretty much lost count. It’s agonizing to think about, what could’ve been…” A pitiful look glazed over Bee’s face as she looked down into the pool that was her punch. Her brow formed into a mildly angry scowl as something crossed her mind; “He couldn’t just give us what we asked for, could he? No. … Hmph. … Guess all of us were destined to be cast down here to rot, all because we wanted a piece of that sweet, sweet…”

“Sweet what?” Loona prodded for an answer with all due respect and appreciation for the context’s gravity.

There was nothing but a long pause from Bee as she silently reflected, her eyes still locked onto the little pool swirling in her red plastic cup. Ancient wounds which were meant to be healed centuries ago seemed to fester and seep blood in such a painful way, the bearer of that burden still affected by its great sting. After much hesitation, Bee let off a miniscule smile and said, looking upwards at Loona and into her eyes; “Nothing, don’t worry about it. Forget it. … Anyway, the point is just.. there are things which some of us would rather not think about. Any mention of it gets us all a bit riled up if you get what I’m saying. It’s like… it’s like picking at old wounds, cutting them open again to watch them bleed and weep. You’d rather not, you know?”

“Yeah. Yeah I get that,” Loona quietly replied while nodding along to Bee’s analogy; “Again, I didn’t mean anything by what I said, I’m sorry. Proooobably shouldn’t have said it in the first place, “think before I speak” and all that jazz.”

For the first time since this conversation of vast seriousness and controversy began, a titter escaped through the Sin’s lips which were curled back into a faint smile. She waved one of her hands at Loona and assured; “Wow, one with the apologies today, arentcha? That’s alright, apology accepted. Just be mindful about what I told you today, alright? Cause next time, you know, I might not be here to, like, get your butt outta trouble and stuff.”

Loona smirked at the last half of Bee’s warning; “I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you for not, say, condemning my ass to prison, or torture, or some shit like that.”

“Whaaaat? Nah girl, that ain’t me!” Bee let out in a guffaw, her instantaneous uplift in mood genuinely surprising Loona who was left taken aback; “I’d be sooo fucking crazy to do that! Now Mammon, maybe, but me?? PFFFFT, nahhh! Besides, that’d be sooo overkill!”

“Right?? Like I’ll be honest, I thought I was gonna DIE or something because of this whole thing!” Loona laughed in alignment with Bee’s sudden attitude change, though methodical with how much she exalted herself.

This confession of partially unfounded fear caused Bee to cackle, waving her hand in dismissal; “Hot damn, girl, your mind’s on FIRE today!! Nawww, you’d have to do something BEYOND fucked up for any of us to do that! Still, stay out of trouble, okay?”

“Eheheh. Yeeeah, I’ll try,” Loona promised with a smile which turned awkward and mildly forced, the mention of some form of death penalty unsettling her by a smidgen; “You too…?” She added with much caution.

Bee shook her head and gently held Loona's shoulder, beginning to lead the hellhound back outside; "Oh Honey, I've been "staying out of trouble" for so long. It's all I know now outside of throwing these chill-as-hell parties! But yeah, uh.. I'm very sorry for how this turned out. Shoulda known there would've been something with Mammon, being the huge loudmouth that he is."

"Nono, it's okay." Loona made haste to reply; "Not as if you can stop people when they decide to be asshats."

"Hah! Yeah, that's very true," Bee considered with a nod, sliding her hand away from Loona's shoulder and set three of her arms to her side, the top left one tasked with holding her punch; "Oh hey, uh… Mind if I could ask you something?"

A question? Loona thought that only she would play the act of a 'groveler', let alone start asking questions if one did arise. And yet, here she was; walking alongside Bee as though they were a pair of old friends who knew each other to a personal degree, chattering away and making up for what was so close to becoming a horrific disaster. Now a question asked by the 'Queen Bee' herself lay at her feet, waiting impatiently to be entertained. Thus, without further ado, Loona acknowledged Bee's incoming inquiry; "Sure?"

"Alright, so… You know how when Mammon grabbed you — dick move by the way — and then he dropped you and began crying about his hand. What happened there?"

"...I dunno, beats me," Loona confessed, just as clueless about Mammon's supposed injury as the Sin of Gluttony was; "Do you know if he actually had a burn on his hand, or was he fucking with us?"

Bee shrugs; "No clue, he refused to show me. I think he was putting on a "song and dance", but who knows with him. Honestly, Loona, don't worry about him. He's a bit fae compared to the rest of us. Suppose the money's finally gotten to his head~"

"Sounds about right," Loona was inclined to agree, putting the question finally to rest in her own mind which was already exhausted from what had happened. Whatever the case might've been in regards to Mammon's hand, whether or not it was the truth or a blatant attempt to incriminate, Loona was rightly more than eager to put it to rest.

“Alright, I— Okay, so she… Ohh, Hades give me strength, this man… Alright Mammon, stop! Slow the absolute fuck down, start from the top! What happened?”

A tall white hat hung loosely from the wall-mounted hat stand behind its owner, the fingers of his left hand clicking impatiently against the varnished surface of his custom ‘Dark Hades-oak’ desk, his opposite hand clasped around a rotary dial telephone which he held up to his ear. For the past two minutes, this lonesome figure had the utmost agonizing “pleasure” of having to listen to the Sin of Greed’s incoherent furious ravings. This wasn’t the first time the figure cloaked in the darkness of his study had to deal with Mammon either, having known him for numerous torturously passing centuries, and years which they had both lost track of. Was it six-thousand years? Seven-thousand five-hundred? His recollection failed him. It failed them both. And now, centuries later, he had nothing but the company of himself and his band of “merry rebels” to keep him entertained; this included his least favorite to deal with, who at present had stifled himself and finally began to speak coherently.

With great attentiveness, the figure nodded along; “Right so you went to Bee’s, yeah? Alright, I got that. Then what happened?” As he heard Mammon’s complaints, the figure took a sip of Wrath-brewed “hellshine” which he had grown a fondness of, drinking it out of an ancient obsidian wine glass which he had owned for nigh on five-thousand years. Now with a replenished throat that stung from the sheer alcoholic concentration, and with Mammon done with his elaboration, the solitary figure asked; “So what got into your head that made you want to fight this hellhound? She was talking… Holy shit, Mammon, come on! How old are you again? … She… she said that?? Right. That’s to be expected, someone like her. Hmph, Hellhounds. … Your hand has a what now? … A burn, what kinda burn?”

A syllable-filled bombshell fell upon the figure’s ears as he listened intently, his brow furrowed as the words sunk in. The longer Mammon spoke and described his injury, the more the figure’s eyes widened with disbelief and perplexion. He muttered to himself a simple phrase; “This can’t be… No way, that can’t be… Mammon, are you sure? One hundred percent?” A bolt of anxiousness coursed through the figure's body like an injection as sweat poured upon his bleached-white brow, wiping the dew with the back of his free hand. His throat felt restricted as he choked out; “Mammon. Be honest with me, please. Are you telling me the truth, and nothing but it? … Y-You’re sure it’s that? … No… No way… A-Alright. Put a callout to Bee for me, tell her that a snap meeting will occur first thing tomorrow morning. … **DON’T argue with me, Mammon, you pathetic oaf, just <u>DO IT!!!</u>**”

<u>CLANG!!</u>

The Call

“Christ on a stick, Loona, you’re kidding me! Out of all the people you could possibly fight with, you squared up against MAMMON?!” Disbelief rang out in Blitz’s voice as he drove Loona home, only having been five minutes since he had picked up his daughter from Bee’s luxurious venue. Out of all the things the imp didn’t expect to hear from the young woman, ‘having a physical confrontation with Mammon himself’ was one which he expected the very least.

“Hey, he started it!” Loona rightfully shifted the blame; “What did you want me to do, sit there in silence like a “good girl” as he insults all of us for the crime of talking??”

Blitz waves his hand and elaborated his stance; “I wasn’t blaming you, Loonie, honestly I’m proud of you! All I’m thinking is how the ever-loving fuck did you survive?? We’re talking about Mammon, THE Mammon; the greediest bloated sack of lard in all of Hell!”

“Apparently I burnt his hand somehow, I dunno,” Loona answered with a shrug. She got herself comfortable enough to begin nodding off, crossing her legs and feeling her muscles relax; “Guess I came off lucky.”

“Huh! That’s an understatement!” Blitz asserted with great certainty; “Look, all I’m saying is I’m glad you’re not dead. I don’t feel like burying my daughter, not ever! Now if I was there to see him man-handling you, I would’ve torn his big green ass to pieces.”

“Yeah, you just try that, moron! Then I would be the one who’ll need to bury you, or at least whatever’s left of you,” Loona tried to knock sense into Blitz; “I really don’t feel like burying you either.”

The imp driver nodded along, adding nothing else to the conversation… until the realization kicked in with the inertia of a bucking mule; “…Wait did you say you BURNT Mammon’s hand??”

“Yep. Apparently I did,” Loona shrugged casually as she closed her eyes to rest them, not thinking much of it other than what it meant face valuewise. Mammon “burnt his hand”, supposedly — that should be the end of that discussion, right? What more was there to say, other than maybe how severe said injury was? In all actuality, Loona saw the incident as nothing which needed to be dwelled on; afterall, what good would that do? Mammon wouldn’t bat an eyelid if she got burnt, as

she was nothing to him. Tit for tat — a valuable, versatile attitude towards a great number of things, and one which if used correctly can greatly benefit its utilizer.

A bout of silence invited itself into the van as its two occupants trailed away from conversing further. That was until Blitz broke the ice by squeaking; “But… h-how?”

Loona cocked an eyebrow, peering through her right eye at her father behind the wheel; “What do you mean ‘how’?”

“Loonie, he’s a SIN. Sins don’t burn all that easily. It’s literally in the company of list of ‘people we WON’T kill’,” an increasingly baffled Blitz explained with utmost sincerity, the look in his eyes suggesting that he didn’t understand Loona’s relatively slack attitude towards the incident; “How could you have possibly burnt him?? Unless of course… n-no, it couldn’t have been. How could it?”

“Couldn’t have been what?” The hellhound passively pressed to know, the imp’s own confusion beginning to rub off on his passenger.

“…Nothing, forget about it,” Blitz shook his head, waving his hand in disregard of what he was about to suggest, then biting the knuckles of his free hand in an unusual nervous fidget.

A sudden temptation to press Blitz on what ‘it’ was materialized in the forefront of Loona’s mind, a temptation which she had no appetite to entertain. She had had enough mind-boggling for one day, maybe the following day or as soon as sometime after a nap would be more a suitable time to ask. But before Loona could seize the opportunity to start napping for the duration of the journey home, Blitz asked yet another question; “Say what did that ‘Queen Bee’ or whatever her name is say to you, about this whole shitshow?”

“Why do you want to know?” Loona let out a groan, her dull, disinterested vocal demeanor giving the loud and clear impression that she didn’t find recounting worth her time. Regardless of what Loona thought to be worth her time or not, “old man circumstance” certainly didn’t care for such trivial matters as ‘priorities’, especially over the past month or so — though it had been quiet for the past five weeks. Unsated was Blitz’s hunger to know more, and Loona knew that he wouldn’t relent until he got what he wanted, prompting her reluctantly to sit back upright in her seat and pry open her eyelids.

At once Loona recalled; “Ugh. Alright, fine. All she said was that I shouldn’t have said what I said, and that I shouldn’t say it again. Stuff about ‘old wounds’ too, and him being a fallen angel. I guess he’s sensitive about it being brought up, and that’s why he lashed out the way he did — At least that’s what Bee told me.”

Callousness and an unwillingness to understand was a staple of Blitz’s persona, a factor which was evident in the way he took this newfound information. With an evocative, almost mocking smirk, the imp remarked; “Woooow. So daddy issues, huh?”

“*Snrrt!* Pretty much, now that you mention it,” Loona agreed with a lurch and a snorting laugh, her father’s remark legitimately catching her off guard.

Blitz bobbed his head in a blase, taunting attitude, openly mocking the Sin-lord; “D’aww, boo-fuckity-hoo, that poor wee baby. It’s not like the rest of us have hardships far worse than him, at least he has a whole RING to own! What makes that big prick so special?”

“Beats me,” Loona sighed, shaking her head at a loss for a clue; “Hey do you mind if we could get some coffee on the way back? And before you mention it, fine. I’ll pay for it this time.”

“Awww, you will?? Well ain’t that so nice and generous of you, pumpkin, doing that for your old man!” Blitz cooed, being quick to devolve into baby-talking his early-to-mid-twenties daughter. On any other given day, Loona would’ve outrightly protested being spoken to in such a way, but considering the close call and subsequent exhaustion she felt from the party, she decided to let it slide. Though Loona would never admit it openly, a very small part of her liked his baby-talk anyhow, finding it oddly comforting, yet amusing in the same way watching a performer make a fool of himself was. Blitz was always a bit eccentric, Loona knew that well, and there was no chance in hell that he would change anytime soon, and frankly his daughter wouldn’t have it any other way. Whether that was out of true appreciation and love for him or a case of advanced Stockholm Syndrome was up to anyone’s guess, even Loona’s own.

Before another hour could pass, the yellow hexagon-bricked roads of Gluttony gave way to the rough, uneven bitumen highways associated with the rugged nature of Wrath and the vastly barren plains of Pride’s far-reaching outskirts, where only the most desperately reclusive dwelled. Loona gazed out through the window and at the very noticeable divide between Pride and Wrath with indifference, having seen the same scene many times over on many a drive in the past. Seldom a thought danced around in Loona’s head as the van bounced sturdily along, the jagged-topped ‘dividing range’ dividing Wrath and Pride a mildly interesting sight for the hellhound’s eyes to focus on instead of sleeping.

“What did you feel like getting, any specific place?” Blitz shattered the silence once more which had settled like a layer of dust.

“Oh shit, good question,” Loona uttered as she began considering; “Uhm… Oh… You know that one café place five minutes away near home, the one with the drive-thru?”

Blitz rolled his eyes dramatically; “Sure I do. I also remember the boot imprint they tattooed on my ass when that pea-dicked manager kicked me out.”

“Say what now.” Loona said in flat-toned disbelief.

“In my defense, a dumbass in there called me a flame toad!”

Loona groaned upon hearing this, tallying off a list in her head to the *“list of places Blitz was banned from”*, a list which had grown over the past six months or so; “Holy shit, another one… Alright, guess I’ll have to just go in myself and get it.”

With this regrettable need to physically get out in mind, as well as the question of why she still tolerated Blitz, Loona propped her head back onto her raised right hand, watching the world pass by a good couple of miles over the speed limit. At least from what she could tell by the landmarks which she had seen countless times prior, there was a good twenty minutes of driving left until they even scratched the furthest outskirts of Imp City. This evokes a tired groan to squeeze through Loona’s lips as she dazed off to an unfocused world of her own, her chin sinking further into the hand supporting her head which acted as a second detached neck. A premonition entered the proverbial ‘stage left’ which was Loona’s vacant mind which told her that it was going to be a long, boring drive home, a detour for coffee as sustenance the only thing making the pain worthwhile. That was until the drowsy hellhound’s phone buzzed in her lap, followed by a faint but audible: ***“Ping!”*** Without craning her head down, Loona’s eyes flicked down towards the lit-up phone screen to discover a peculiar message which caught her interest: **“[1] Missed Call: ERROR: Number Incompatible”**.

“Who was that, muffin?” Blitz asked without taking his eyes off from the road, butting into Loona’s personal business like the professional “respecter” of privacy he was.

That was a good question. “Huh… Doesn’t say,” Loona told Blitz in a half-mumble as she shifted her head down towards the screen with a confused look. The phone’s owner picks up the device in her dominant hand to investigate further, tapping on the message to figure out her next course of

action. Other than the option to bookmark the message or to delete it, there really wasn't any way for Loona to find out the origins of the missed clue, or any clues. An error message it was, and a simple error message it would remain, an out-of-the-blue mystery destined to forever remain as such, giving Loona no other option aside from shrugging it off which she gladly did.

And so time elapsed — One minute turned to five, then ten, evolving into fifteen, then at last crawling to its final manifestation into the golden number of twenty. The wide open plains of Pride gave way to the vast metropolitan labyrinth which was Imp City, a place of various reputations depending on which part of town one dared venture into. So as to avoid having to navigate through the busy streets of this great urban "masterpiece", Blitz opted to use the network of inner city bypasses, preferring to deal with other cars rather than annoying obstacles like pedestrians, of which he had hit "a few" in the past to the agony of his lawyer. Loona was much familiar with Blitz's lawyer, a Succubus professional by the name of 'Kim' who the hellhound honestly felt sorry for; it was bad enough to be his daughter, imagine being his godforsaken lawyer.

Ping!

"What the hell…" Loona muttered with even more perplexion than last time, squinting at the phone-screen as she read yet another error message, this one identical to the last; "Who the fu— what even is this, who's tryna call me??"

"Another one??" Blitz asked curiously as he took the off-ramp away from the bypass, slowing the van down to half the speed it was doing.

Loona shook her head, lazily chucking her phone onto the dashboard, throwing her hands up in annoyance; "Nuh uh. This has to be some kind of joke! Fucking prank-callers, get a life…"

"Oh thank Luci, we're here!" Blitz exclaimed with fatigued relief, steering the van into a car park which surrounded the foretold small but busy coffee shop. Unlike the comparatively drab and borderline depressing surroundings, this particular store only established in the past year or so had a unique vibrancy to it, as if it resided in its own little pleasant bubble. The founder and owner of "CaffVixen", a middle-aged botanist hellhound woman who was kind enough but didn't take kindly to nonsense, had made this standalone store something to behold for everyone who visited. Between sections of parking spaces were bountiful shrubbery and plants which she had planted all herself, taking the time out of her day to trim and water them regularly. The interior, too, was of the same botanically-based splendorous presentation, a potted plant designated to every spot possible but out of the way, which in turn gave the inside a remarkable soothing fragrance. All of this, coupled with the small but praiseworthy menu, rightfully earned it the title as "best Café of the month" in the latest edition of 'Hellhound Monthly' — and of course Blitz managed to get himself kicked out from it.

The ‘I.M.P.’ company Van careened into a free parking space and lightly screeched to an abrupt halt, the engine shutting off on its own from the poor treatment it received. This was Loona’s cue to get out, the young woman huffing as she undid her seatbelt, swinging her door open before stepping out with handbag in, well, hand. Before CaffVixen’s latest customer made any move towards the restaurant itself, she leant back into the car and asked her designated driver; “What do you want?”

“Anything with coffee in it, pumpkin! Oh! And make it a double-shot for daddy,” Blitz dictated his order, gesturing with a down-pointed finger to give emphasis.

Loona grimaced; “Please don’t call yourself that, it’s gross,” she groaned and finally shut the door, at last making her way across the car park and towards the entrance, made enticing by an all-natural exterior archway made of pure botany.

Setting foot inside proved the interior to be just as attractive as the outside, if not more so, as Loona was hit in the face with a sweet floral fragrance. Aside from the owner’s clear passion for everything flora, the inside looked to be nothing too out of the ordinary; a handful of booths situated beside a large, long window, a few singular round tables with one or two chairs, a front counter occupied by a food display cabinet, a coffee machine, a mini fridge, and so on, all complete with a large wall-mounted menu board. Completing the scene was the abundance of people occupying the space; other hellhounds, succubi, imps, and a pair of shark-type demons. Preventing Loona from walking right up to the counter and ordering was a line of three or four, a cue which she regrettably had to wait in; such is the domino effect of Blitz’s ban. Even more time elapsed spanning only a few minutes, the half-goat half-imp cashier surprisingly quick with completing every single order thrown at him; such is the steady flow of retail commerce.

At some point in the duration of Loona’s waiting when she was second in line, the goat-imp cashier was replaced with none other than the owner herself. While Loona had seen her on-and-off in brief glimpses before, she hadn’t taken the chance to take a closer look to identify her specific details. She was a lanky, cream Borzoi-esque hellhound with signs of graying hair around her muzzle, along with a mane of luxuriously blonde hair tied into a neat bun, each strand of hair along her body appearing to have been intricately combed. Her clothing choice was plain; just a black polo-shirt with yellow borders tucked loosely into her pair of blue jeans, a tan belt threaded through the loops holding it all in place. A name badge with a white background and simple black lettering hung on the left breast pocket of her shirt, heralding the wearer’s name: **“-=Lola=-”**, with all four letters highlighted in bold and finished off with an underline.

After the shark demon in front of Loona walked off with his piping-hot beverage now in his hand, “Lola” turned to the hellhound next in line, a hospitable smile lighting up her face. She greets in a sing-song voice; “Hel-lo! What can I get for you, luv’?”

Loona in turn stares analytically up at the menu board; “Hey I’ll just get a.. uh.. Oh! Just two ‘Dirty Chais’, both medium, and make one a double-shot.”

“Yup, no worries!” ‘Lola’ piped up, typing down the order at the register; “Aaaand what would be the name for that one?”

“Just put ‘Loona’ for that.”

Lola nodded enthusiastically; “Certainly! … Wait... Say, you’re not that ‘Blitz’s’ daughter, are you?”

“Ugh— Yes, I am. Adopted,” Loona groaned, knowing full well the reason why the cashier was asking; “And yeah, I heard about the incident. He told me he got kicked out because of it.”

“That he did,” the owner confirmed with a noticeable cringe, all the while she took it upon herself to make Loona’s order; “I didn’t personally see it, but my husband Jeb was the one to kick him out. Said that your dad—”

“Adoptive dad,” Loona didn’t hesitate to correct.

“Right, sorry — Your ‘Adoptive dad’ was picking a fight with someone he knew, something about money or some crap like that,” Lola recounted; “Needless to say he won’t be coming back anytime soon.”

Loona nodded along to this retelling, rolling her eyes at Blitz’s behavior; “Yeah, he’s like that sometimes. Honestly I don’t blame you for kicking him out, the way he can be. … So how did you know I’m his daughter?”

“‘Cause he kept hollering your name, saying that you would “exact revenge” on my husband’s “ass” and whatnot,” the store owner further recalled, halfway through brewing both drinks in Loona’s order.

“Of course he did. In his dreams…” Loona mumbled disapprovingly; “Look I’m so sorry about him, he’s a complete wreck sometimes.”

Lola laughed off the hellhound’s apology and shrugged it off, taking it all in the fullest of good humor; “Nono, don’t be sorry! Hey, as long as you don’t exact revenge on my husband’s ass, then we’re all good!”

A wide grin broke across Loona’s face as she chuckled along with the owner, relieved that ‘Lola’ viewed the altercation in good spirits without much hard feelings. If you were to ask just on how many occasions over the years she had been singled out for being the daughter of Blitz, and thus guilty of association, Loona would be able to recite at least ten different occasions over the span of five years, if not more. Safe to say that the overzealous, borderline assholish imp had made numerous adversaries over his years; luckily for Loona’s sake, this middle-aged hellhound and proud owner of “CaffVixen” wasn’t one of them, at least to the extent which Loona herself had bore witness to. Just as the hellhound’s laugh died down, a vibration from within her handbag started going off incessantly, along with the muffled sound of a ringtone. Instinctively Loona swipes her phone out from her handbag and looks down at the screen: **“Unknown Caller”**, it read in bold letters, the option to either hang up or answer the call staring right back. This was the third time some “unknown caller” had tried to reach Loona, and there was no way she was going to miss the opportunity to find out exactly who it was. And so, after excusing herself and walking outside, Loona answered the call. With a huff, she held the phone up to her ear and demanded with clear annoyance; “Yeah what, who is this?”

“Oh shit, Loona!”

The voice which buzzed through the receiver was utterly unmistakable; “Wh— Jim??”

“Yeah it’s me!” Jim’s voice echoed through the speaker with light static interference; *“~~Star~~started think~~ing~~ I wouldn’t be ~~able to~~ get to ~~y~~a!”*

Suddenly everything made sense to Loona, almost instantaneously; “What… Oh wait! So that was you trying to call me??”

Another pang of intense static squealed through the speaker which caused Loona to wince, only for it to thankfully stop and be replaced with Jim’s drawling voice; *“Yeah that was me! I kept tryin’ to reach ya but nothin’ really went through ‘til now. So how’s it been, whatcha up to?”*

“Nothing much, just ordering coffee,” Loona casually explained, looking through the glass entrance door towards the counter, finding that her order wasn’t quite ready as of yet. She continued; “What about you, how’s life up there?”

“Ah yanno, same old, same old. Nuthin’ to complain about, aye.” The line went silent for a couple of measly seconds as Loona’s caller seemingly thought on what to say next; *“Oh yeah, why I called! Yeah listen, uh, thought I should call to relay a message to you, figured that it’s kinda important.”*

“Go on…” Loona confirmed her interest in the aforementioned message, anticipating the details. The way the word ‘important’ was used sounded mildly foreboding, putting the hellhound’s mind slightly on edge.

“Do you remember the Russian bloke? You know, what’s his name… Vasily! Yeah, him! Do ya remember him?”

“Sure I do,” Loona said as her interest piqued further; “Why, what about him?”

“Yeah well he’s been calling me for the past few days or so, about two or three times I reckon. He’s been asking about you, seeing if you’ve been around my joint recently.”

Loona’s eyes narrowed to a confused and suspicious squint; “Sounds kinda creepy, but okay. Why, what’s he want with me?” Yet another near deafening wave of line interference screeches in Loona’s ear, causing her to flinch in pain. The connection was once again showing signs of failure; “Argh, shit! Jim, you there? Helloo?”

“~~St~~ill here, do~~n’t wor~~ry! The line’s just ~~really sh~~it,” Jim rest assured and cleared his throat; *“Ahem! Uhh, so he wanted me to relay a message to you, something about seeing… Do you remember that other bloke, the priest?”*

“Jim, to be completely frank, I really don’t like where this is going.”

“He just wants to speak to ya, it’s nothing to worry about!”

Loona let out a gruff sigh; “Mhm. Oh I’m sure he does… Jim, come on. You’re a good guy and I know that you’ve got nothing but good intentions, but… I’m a hellhound — a HELL-Hound. Do you honestly think me, a hellhound, going to speak to a priest is a good idea?”

The caller on the other end answered with a counterpoint; *“Ya didn’t have a problem speaking to him when you picked me up from Hospital a good cuppla’ weeks back. Why’s this time any different?”*

“Wh— Okay, but that was different!” Loona pinched her brow and squinted her eyelids shut, the temptation to go up and accept the invitation battling against the hellhound’s deeply-rooted reservations; “I’m sorry, but no. I spoke my mind last time to him, that’s all I needed to say. Just say to ‘Vasily’ or whatever his name is again that I can’t do it. It’s too risky.”

“Ah, so ya DO want to speak with him,” Jim picked up, paying attention to the hellhound’s last couple of words.

“K-Kinda? Wait, no! I mean… Argh, for fuck sake… O-Okay, look! I’ll…” Loona ceased stuttering her words and thought about her answer, thinking hard on the invitation on offer; “… Ugh, can’t believe I’m doing this… Alright, fine! I’ll come up tomorrow morning, see you over at your place. Could we discuss it there, see what my options are before I do anything?”

“Yeah, no worries!” Jim obliged; *“I’ll be here all morning anyhow. We’ll discuss it over coffee, ay?”*

“Yeah. That sounds good.” Loona looked down at her feet and gently kicked at the ground, figuring out in her head as to where to go from there; “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“All good! See ya then!”

“See you.” The dull buzz of the dial tone rang lightly in Loona’s ear before she lowered her phone and turned it off. As she reflected upon the apparent invitation and speculated its true intentions, a mixture of curiosity and cautiousness stirred within her. While of course Loona had, albeit partially, willingly accepted the invite to come back to the human world, the alert and calculated part of her wondered if the intent was for better or for worse. Amidst these stirring feelings was the flicker of something greater, an urge which both human and hellborn alike were most familiar with — the desire to explore, to investigate.

“Hey, uh, ma’am?”

Loona’s ears perked up to the sound of a voice behind her, turning around to find an imp poking out from beyond the entrance door. “Your order’s ready,” he said in a mildly reserved manner.

“Oh, right! Yeah sorry, I was just… yeah,” Loona stammered as she pushed past the patron and towards the front counter, indecision festering in her mind like an invasive species which caused the world around her to become like a blur. She had much to think about.

The next day...

The dusty white pebbles of the gravel driveway up towards the all-too familiar homestead crunched under Loona’s step, with nothing but her phone and wallet in tow which bounced around in her shorts’ pockets. A light morning mist hung low on the land, blessing this slice of earth with an appearance which could be described as ‘mystical’ — or ‘whimsical’, Loona thought, or whichever it was. She was never an expert on words. Furthermore the grass which coated the hills like fur on the back of an animal looked to have been recently rained on, the landscape which was previously covered in patches of beige and brown washed away and renewed with a healthy, vibrant green. The large, tall native tree which Loona brooded under those few long months back seemed rejuvenated as well, the eucalyptus leaves too replenished with the morning dew as the tree’s long, gargantuan shadow casted westwards.

“And so she arrives!” An all-too familiar voice called from the homestead’s verandah, the sole amicable resident who sat in his wooden chair promptly getting up and outstretched his arms. He wore the same style of clothing Loona had seen him countless times in; a button up blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a pair of beige trousers, and his pair of brown leather boots which he was always seen with, making the frequent visitor wonder if he even had another pair.

Loona smiled as she climbed up the stairs onto the porch; “Yeah, it’s me! Always is, isn’t it?” She chuckled as the pair of them locked into a brief, firm hug. After a firm pat on her friend’s back, Loona pulled away and asked; “How’s your morning been, good?”

“Decent enough,” Jim shrugged with a light grin; “What about you?”

“Full of thoughts, dude. Full of so many thoughts,” Loona groaned with a feigned grin, shaking her head before she looked towards the setup behind the fellow youngun. No longer was there a lounge chair, in its place a more suitable, almost stereotypical setup — two vintage-looking wooden chairs flanking either side of a waist-high rounded table, finely varnished. Atop the small and compact table was a round silver tray, on it was a brown tin coffee pot, a short flask of milk, and two white tin coffee mugs with a teaspoon each. Loona raised her brow at the display and smirked; “Never gonna beat those ‘old man’ allegations, are you?”

“Not in a million years,” Jim responded in good spirits, leading his visitor towards the chairs which they both sat down in.

Loona softly grunted as she sat down, rubbing the back of her neck to rid of a knot which had formed, the pressure causing it to “pop” which gave the hellhound instant relief. A gentle brisk breeze glided across the porch as Loona got comfortable, her fur no match for how piercing yet soothing it was against her entire body, like a deep massage which soothed and permeated through every single muscle. In this realm of stillness, only tranquility reigned with her generous velvet glove.

“Say where’s that book thing ya carry around?”

“Didn’t bring it this time. Stolas says I can’t have it anymore, at least according to dad.”

“Why’s that?”

“Beats me. Just said that I can’t and that’s that. Dad’ll pick me up when I call him.”

A tranquil mutual silence then fell upon both man and hellhound as they appreciated the environment they found themselves amidst. Residing in a form invisible to the naked eye was an aura of unshakable peace, one which cast a deep hypnotic spell on any of those who willingly immersed themselves in it.

“I missed this place,” Loona found herself confessing almost subconsciously, the words slipping out of her mouth like they had a mind of their own.

This provoked a response from Jim as he poured Loona's serving of coffee; "Ah yeah? I don't blame ya. Little slice of heaven, all this."

"Uh-huh. Bet that isn't the last time I hear about Heaven today," Loona remarked as she picked up her piping-hot serving of coffee. She took a brief sip, being cautious so as not to burn her tongue; it was the perfect blend of bitter and sweetness, one which satisfied Loona wholly. She let out a satisfied gasp as she continued; "Still really confused as to what they see in me, honestly, unless they're gonna try to convert me." An almost cocky smirk appeared on the hellhound's face; "Safe to say that'll be a lost cause."

"So why'd you agree to come up?" Jim inquired curiously, taking a sip of his own freshly poured serving, plumes of steam wisping up from the tin mug.

In a state of being indecisive, Loona snickered and let off a shrug; "Pfft! I dunno. Just curious I guess?" Even in this remark was the apparently "just curious" hellhound unsure of her own claim, this lack of confidence showing briefly in her eyes. It was a good question too — Why *did* she agree to come up? Eventually Loona digressed; "A-Anyway, enough about that for the time being. Uh… Oh! So how's that girl going, have you found her yet?"

"Who now? … Ohh, her! Yeah nah, not yet. She's moved outta town I reckon."

"Uff. That's rough," Loona grimaced, expressing her sympathy in a minimal but wholly understanding way.

"Nahh, not really," Jim spoke with a light groan to his voice; "People come, people go. They'll be someone else out there for me, just gotta look for her a little further. What's your advice then, on women."

This took the hellhound back by surprise; "You're asking me for advice, about others? Well shit, I… hm… it depends on what you mean by 'women', like what about them?"

Jim scratched the side of his face as he stared out into the horizon, considering his answer; "Ehh… I dunno, like in general. How do you find someone?"

“Woah there, you’re asking the wrong hellhound, dude!” Loona jokingly replied before returning to a serious mindset; “Like… Just be yourself, man. There’s nothing much else to it than just to show who you are, I guess. I’ve known for a while, pretty sure you’re a decent catch.”

“Appreciate that!” The young man gave out his gratitude with a half-grin, before once more diverting back towards far more pressing issues — the reason why Loona was here in the first place; “So you said yesterday, on the phone, that you wanted to talk to me in person about your options.”

“Yep. I mean, like… Okay, it’s less about what my options are and more that… I-I’m just afraid.” Yet another confession slipped right out of Loona’s mouth, one which hit her especially hard. It was one thing for her to feel it, another to hear herself openly admit it to someone else. She felt utterly vulnerable, something which she despised.

“Of what?”

“…What if this priest guy finds out what I am? Pretty sure he doesn’t know yet. But when he does, what then?”

“How about this — we cross that bridge when we get there. Don’t suppose there’s much use worrying about things that mightn’t happen. Just give it a shot, it’s obvious you wanna go ahead with this.” As Jim offers his advice, he fishes his phone out from his right trouser pocket and displays it for Loona to see. He shakes it a little to draw the hesitant hellhound’s attention to it; “Do you want me to call Vasily, say that you wanna go ahead with it?”

This was it; the “point of no return” which Loona had to face. It had finally come after ample anticipation which was laced with a concoction of dread and nervousness. After much internal debate with herself, mentally preparing herself for what may soon come, the hellhound gave her final say; “…Please?”

With all that was needed to be permitted since given the all clear, Jim dials a number on his phone and holds it up to his ear. He waits for a few seconds until, at last, the call is answered; “Hello, Vasily? … Yeah it’s Jim here. … Yeah I’m all good, yourself? … Aight, that’s good. Hey listen, I’ve got Loona here, right? I’ve spoken to her about the thing you want her to do, she said she wants to go ahead with it. … Yeah? … Yeah, she’s right here.” Jim then does the unexpected, lowering the phone away from his ear before handing it over towards Loona; “He wants to speak to you.”

Now was Loona's big moment; "Here we go…" she muttered under her breath as she accepted the call, grabbing Jim's phone from his hand and holding it up to her left ear. A lump in the throat prevented Loona from speaking for a mere second which disappeared after a swallow, allowing her to speak; "Yeah, hello?"

"Loona, I need you to listen very carefully to what I'm about to say to you. It's imperative that you remember all this." Vasily's voice buzzed prominently through the receiver into the hellhound's ear like a deep bell, that bone-chilling guttural ring it possessed enough to scare the wits out of the most hardened of convicts.

The sheer urgent sound to the familiar voice was enough to convince Loona to give it her all to listen. She squeaked soberly; "I-I'm listening."

"Good. You should be," Vasily said; *"Understand that the man who I am sending you to is of great blessed authority, and the grounds to which you will tread on are just as holy as his position. His name's Father Aleksander, and I'm told that you conversed with him not too long ago. I am sending you to him because he requested for me to do so, he is keen on speaking with you. You are to greatly respect both him and those grounds, lest you face grave consequences. It is imperative that you do this, for his sake, my sake, and your own. Do I make myself clear?"*

"Crystal," Loona stated in utter compliance, the intense reality finally settling in within her mind. In all actuality for someone like herself, this was a literal 'life or death' situation, and any wrong move would spell her end. Seems as though Loona's earlier assumption about the topic of 'Heaven' and other closely related topics was entirely correct.

"Hm. We will see," the sound of Vasily clearing his throat gutturally distorted the line for a second before he continued; *"You are to drive north up to Toowoomba. It is there you will find a Church called the 'Russian Orthodox Church of Saint Basil', and in the church grounds there is a small dedicated function hall which also hosts an office section, right across from the church itself. Father Aleksander is expecting to meet you there sometime today, as soon as possible. Although he is patient, do not keep him waiting.*"

Loona nodded along to the information put upon her, memorizing it all; "Got it. Hang on a minute, just a question."

"Go ahead."

“You do realize you’re sending me onto church grounds, right?”

“I am aware.”

“Right, and that doesn’t phase you. Got it. So what if I can’t physically go on there, me being a hellhound and all?”

“Whatever is supposed to happen, will happen.”

“Wow, so helpful…” Loona expressed sarcastically; “Alright, I got all that. Thanks for the talk?”

“Do not make a wrong move,” Vasily merely replied in his voice of gravelly cast iron. That was the final word said before the call was abruptly hung up, the purring dial tone buzzing right into Loona’s ear, leaving her alone to meticulously consider her next move.

Jim spoke up so as to avoid delving into oppressive silence; “So whatcha wanna do now?”

Loona dared not say a word, sitting in quiet deep thought as she took a sip of her coffee, her eyes gazing outwards at the awe-inspiring scenery of rolling hills, ancient trees, and luscious fields. A little slice of heaven indeed it was, and amidst it all the hellhound sat, pondering many things. One question stood prominently out to Loona, one which was completely unshakable and mentally paralyzing — ‘What now?’ A profound feeling of both wonder and stagnation cut through the hellhound’s very being as she looked up to the divinely blue sky, observing a large patch of gray clouds in the furthest north horizon. That’s when Loona knew it, though the conclusion was subconscious in its nature — this her call.

But was it right for her to accept?

The Patriarch

“You still comfy there, Loona?”

“…Mm?”

“Tsh! I said, are you good there? You look dozy.”

“Mhm… Yeah I’m fine, just looking outside. It’s nice.”

It had come to pass that Loona was now making a journey which seldom any other hellborn had ever taken before, except maybe the foolish and the downright suicidal — A journey which, if successful, would mark a paramount feat in hellborn history to greatly surpass anything else achieved or attempted. Alas, however, this achievement would need to be celebrated with much secrecy, as this was no bragging right; this was, in all actuality, a dirty “little” secret, and one that would spell great ramifications if spread amongst Hell’s Joe Public. Though Hell was no doubt a gargantuan place full of millions, if not billions of inhabitants, instantaneous spread of all things news and gossip-related was nothing but guaranteed, all thanks to the innovations of certain select ‘Sinner Overlords’ over the recent decades. None were more influential than the so-dubbed “Three Vs” as of late, their exalted hegemony over all things media, pleasure, and drug related knowing no bounds. They had eyes and ears all over the place, in some cases in the literal sense, and nothing was out of their reach, with some amongst the hellborn whispering that they even had ears into Lucifer’s daily life, some of which was… embarrassing to say the least. In short, there was ample opportunity for all sorts of hurtful gossip to spread throughout Hell, with many people desperate to spread it — If word got out that Loona was flirting with certain ‘divine’ elements, the explosive spread of such a fact would be phenomenal. The dire consequences for Loona herself, even more so.

And so it was that Loona “the passenger princess” gazed out the window in a soft daydream, watching the world whizz by her at approximately eighty kilometers an hour, the delicate bounces of the tyres against bitchumen lulling her into a calm, docile state. The hellhound needed the relaxation after all, especially for what she foresaw as the difficult road ahead. Since leaving Jim’s home, Loona had transformed herself into her human form, which although made her more susceptible to the cold breeze outside, was her only real means of concealing her true identity. In saying this, Loona didn’t dislike her human form, in fact she loved it; she just needed to pack a warmer wardrobe was all. What’s more was that she had so much unique opportunity for clothing styles and makeup in her human form, being able to pull off certain styles which were near impossible in her true hellhound form, most notably being shoes. Ballerina flats, Sneakers, Boots, Heels, Sandals, and more; these were all shoes which Loona always wanted to pull off in her human form, combining them in outfits which she deemed cute. Though her form changed

externally, internally the disguised hellhound was just the same. Same likes, same dislikes, same everything, and this included a more secret side to her; Loona loved car rides.

It was true! This usually indifferent, reserved, and more often than not surly young woman secretly loved going on drives, especially ones where she didn't need to do anything except sightsee and daydream. When the chance arose too, Loona brung with her a blanket if the trip was especially lengthy, making a mid-drive snooze all the more comfier with an aura of 'safety', satisfying a more "puppy" side to the hellhound which she's never grown out of. Blankets were and still are Loona's favorite, this has always been the case from her puppy days in the absence of a proper plush toy. Cuddle it, wrap herself in it, chewing the fabric, other childhood-related things, you name it! Loona did all that to her favorite scruffy blanket for as long as she had it, comforting her especially during her lengthy stay in the adoption center. Digression aside, the often outwardly reclusive Loona truly had a softer, more "delicate" side to her, one which wanted to indulge in sweet and wholesome things — this was a side a very select few knew about, and even then to a very minimal extent.

Loona's red-irised eyes glanced out through the window with her chin resting in her palm, her fingers curled lazily into a semi-circle and fingertips pressed against her cheek. She scratches her soft, pale cheek faintly, giving no thought or energy into it at all in what was nothing more than a mindless reflex. After exhaling deeply through her nose, Loona mumbled; "Mmm… Uff, I'm tired."

"Are you?" Jim piped up with his eyes firmly locked on the road ahead; "You can go to sleep if you want."

"I think I might," Loona agreed in a lax, lazy voice; "Wanna just… sleep under one of those trees out there."

"What about the snakes?"

"Psh! The snakes can get fucked, I'll sleep where I want," Loona said before breaking into a soft yawn, sinking a little further into the soft leather padded seat of Jim's pickup. The passenger princess hellhound gazed out at the wide open fields and grasslands, a solitary house or two off in the distance catching her eye every so often, as well as the odd appearance of distant trees; some growing in tightly concentrated clusters, while others stood alone amidst the rich grass like a solitary wanderer. It was continuously vibrant and sublime scenes like this which made Loona appreciate life in general, the chance to witness all of existence in all of its natural ingenuity all made possible through the will to 'just keep going'. To stop and give up would mean capitulation, and Loona was making no such plans anytime soon. She cherished too much to throw in the towel just like that.

“You ever seen a snake in person?” Jim passively asked in the pure spirit of striking up conversation.

“Sure,” Loona said after another yawn, entertaining Jim’s idea of talking about a random topic; “I’ve seen some. Also met one with arms, legs, and was a cowboy. Jumped out a window before I could say anything to him.”

“Cowboy snakes now. Jesus Christ.”

Loona smirked as she lazily tilted her head towards the driver, her eyes doing most of the work by turning straight at him; “Yeah. It’s unbelievable, I know. But he exists, just some gun-toting rattlesnake with a mean look in his dumb yellow eyes. Whatever, I couldn't care less about him. He’s down there somewhere in Wrath, and I’m up here.”

Jim nodded along in silence for a second as they passed through a small town, still heading ever northwards. Then he remarks; “Hell’s a funny old place, innit?”

“Sure is,” Loona huffed as she scratched her forearm from an itch, the irritation disappearing soon as her black nail-polished fingernails made contact. She completed the thought with a low and reflective; “Sometimes too funny. … Why do you think that is?”

“Think what?”

“Why Hell’s the way it is,” the disguised hellhound pressed on with her question, her eyelids narrowing into a thought-provoked squint; “You’d figure there’d be an improvement on our lives down there, right? With the whole ‘free will’ thing and all. Like come on, the ‘Sins’ or whatever they call themselves, they’ve got complete free reign over their rings and all that jazz. … So why doesn’t it ever improve? Like, ‘people not suffering’ wise. Why does the whole ‘hellhound adoption program’ thing still exist? That shit’s awful.”

“I dunno, Loona, I really don’t. Wish I had an answer for that,” Jim sighed as he listened intently, his sympathies entirely with Loona; “That’s a question you gotta ask them, that’s what I reckon.”

“Hm.” Once more the troubled hellhound fell into silence as her eyes drifted towards the road ahead. No longer did Loona wish to speak on the matter as she didn’t want to ruin a perfectly good day, instead aligning her mind towards the far more comforting ‘here’ and ‘now’. Despair only leads those who succumb to it to a fate swallowed in utter misery, and thankfully Loona knew this for her own sake. The small somber frown on Loona’s black-lipsticked lips turned into a faint smile as a thought crossed her mind. With the thought fresh in her mind, the passenger grabbed the driver’s attention; “Hey, so about that freaky snake cowboy weirdo I mentioned.”

“What about him?”

The newfound smirk on Loona’s face remained as she said; “I reckon you could kick his little serpent ass if you had to.”

“What’s this all about, do you want me to?”

“Oh no-no, I’m just saying!” Loona insisted as she found herself entertained by the thought, closing her eyes for some rest; “Like say, hypothetically, if he came up to you and challenged you to a fistfight, would you accept?”

“Uh… I-I dunno, Loona, I don’t think I’d—”

“Dude, it's a hypothetical. Come on, make some shit up with me, have a bitta fun with this!”

Jim snickered, in the end finding his passenger’s insistence amusing and hard to resist; “You’re oddly insistent on this. Ah fucken— alright, I’ll play along! So how tall is this bastard?”

“HAH!!” Loona let out a sudden burst of laughter; “I wouldn’t call that weirdo “tall”, he’s like well below my armpits! He’s like a little yapping chihuahua compared to both of us.”

“Right, so a shortarse. Yeah nah, I’ve dealt with a few of ‘em before.” The young man gave much consideration to his response with his eyes still locked straight ahead; “Well if old mate’s anything like other shortarses I’ve met, which I have a feeling he’s not, then yeah I reckon I could dim him down. What’s this bloke’s name?”

“Striker,” Loona showed no hesitancy to inform.

“Hm! That’s a pretty fucked name! Striker, what kinda mum gives her kid a name like that?”

“Right??” Loona chuckles with her eyes still shut, having now long since made herself at home in the padded leather seating, surprised at just how soft and therapeutic it was to laze off on. Sure it wasn’t her bed, but it might as well have been.

“But yeah, sounds like ya don’t like him very much,” Jim noted to Loona in the most casual of observations.

“Well, duh!” Loona responds with a roll of the eyes, purposefully cracking open her eyelids to do so; “Why else would I be fantasizing about you beating his ass to a pulp? He probably deserves it. There’s a whole vibe to him I don’t trust…”

“That's why you refer to backstabbers as ‘snakes’.”

The disguised hellhound enthusiastically snapped her fingers, then pointed to her “partner in crime” only by name as if she had an epiphany; “No, you’re right! You’re exactly right! Anyway, how long do we have to go?”

“Not long now, probably about fifteen minutes,” Jim provided a rough estimate in earnest. He sticks out his thumb and gestures behind him; “Pretty sure that was Wyreema back there, the town we went through, so the drive’s nearly over.” A large livestock truck roared past with a rattle in the right opposite lane, the sheer speed of it passing causing Jim’s pickup to rock, which in turn woke Loona up in a startle. The driver exclaimed; “For God’s sake, those bloody lorry drivers!”

“Is that what that was??” Loona asked in a complete and utter daze, turning around and looking through the rear window, spotting the road train speeding off into the distance.

“Yeah it was!” The young man exclaimed in a half-shout; “Like fucken hell, they rip through here at a hundred kays like it’s nothing! No wonder there’s hundreds of dead roos on the side of the fucken road, you got them pricks running them over! Jesus, mate, yanno like slow the hell down!”

Now Loona was no stranger to finding entertainment in anger, and Jim's rant was no different, though she understood his frustration. This outburst from her designated driver was different, in the fact that she found it especially entertaining. As a further matter of fact, she didn't just find it entertaining, no; Loona found it to be an absolute riot, a series of suppressed convulsions of laughter diminished into a series of embarrassing snickering and snorts.

Of course, Jim took note of this which in turn brightened his mood; "Having a good old chuckle there, ay? Look at ya with your schadenfreude!"

"Whaat? I can't help that you're funny!" Loona grinned widely, any remnants of the despairful thoughts which ran rampant through her mind long since disappeared, vanished as if they were a ghost. She continued laughing before concluding; "I swear if you weren't here, I'd be bored as hell! Haha, ahh… But seriously man, like… thanks for being here."

"Nahh, it's nothing. Just focus on today, yeah? Talking to this priest and all. Try not to think about too much else, you'll stress yourself out if you do."

"Can you blame me for stressing out about it though? It's not like this is an everyday thing," Loona stated while reflecting on the pressing issue, with Jim's response being a short and understandable nod. She watched as the sides of the road ahead got increasingly more populated with small warehouses and industrial properties, a telltale sign that a major town was just ahead. It certainly looked major, especially with the sudden increase in traffic and trucks barrelling in the opposite direction, as well as pedestrians going about their lives, not knowing that a hellhound was in their midst. Luckily for the locals, this particular hellhound was docile, contained in an aging ute with one of their fellow men who, depending on a certain point of view, was "foolish" for hanging out with such a beast.

"What'd you say this place was called?" Jim asked as he pulled up behind a short line of cars, all of which were stopped at a red traffic light.

"The… 'Church of Saint Basil', or something like that," Loona tried to recollect, digging up the name from the back of her mind after having partially forgotten about it.

The driver furrowed his brow as he thought about the name, repeating it aloud; "The Church of Saint Ba— Ohh, that one! Yeah yeah, I know which one it is."

"You do?"

“Yeah yeah, I’ve seen it a few times!” Jim insisted with great confidence, his recollection serving him well; “It’s a big one, actually, nice green space around the front of the church and an old-looking hall behind it. Massive old oak tree on the grounds, too! Got a statue under it as well, it’s of… ‘The Second Emperor Nicholas’, I think it is. Least that’s what a mate of mine told me.”

“Huh..” Loona half-acknowledged, visualizing the reasonably in-depth scene in her head, though this ‘Nicholas’ guy was entirely novel to her, on account of having never heard of him. From what she could gather, it did sound like a pleasantly quaint scene, at least for those who came there with good intentions. Yes, Loona was going there all in good faith, the uneasiness stirred by the question of whether or not she would be accepted onto said grounds weighed heavily. All in good time, she thought, all in the fullness of good time.

At last the traffic got a move on again as soon as the light turned green, the flow of cars carrying on as usual, like the complexities of clockwork whirring within a handmade automaton. Such is the flow of life, the opposite of which needn’t be named. Speaking of this quality, Loona turned her head left to see the very earthly embodiment of death; a large cemetery, one which was guarded by a long white picket fence and a continuous line of trees, providing refuge in the form of shade against the sun. As far as Loona could see, the graves of all shapes, sizes, and masonry-styles stretched in long rows in a uniform eastward-orientated sea of various gray shades.

This sudden interest from the disguised hellhound wasn’t lost on Jim who casually informed her of the name; “'Drayton and Toowoomba Cemetery'. One of the largest in the state, next to Toowong in Brisbane.”

“No kidding…” Loona commented in mild awe at the size of it all, trying to count in her head exactly how many graves she could see. Before she knew it, they had passed the yards and yards of graves, the boundary of the cemetery ending right at the corner of an intersection.

As Jim steered the car right onto yet another stretch of long traffic-populated road — the sides of which were populated with numerous buildings, cars, and people alike — he announced; “Aight, somewhere to your left is where that church should be, along this main road. Keep an eye out for it, I’m keeping my eyes ahead.”

“You got it,” Loona obliged as she let out a heavy sigh, once more bracing herself for what was to come. While a glimmer of hope that this meeting might turn out positive burned brightly in her like a dancing flame, so too did the feeling that this, in all actuality, might be her death sentence. Vasily’s words echoed in her head as a staunch reminder: *‘**Do not make a wrong move**’*. Easier said than done, Loona thought, though she mustered up a morsel of faith in herself to keep herself

motivated. She needed to do this, something within her told her so — Her conscience? Her new inexplicable hunger for something novel and different? Perhaps.

Shortly after Loona began scanning everything to her left, that's when she finally saw it; "Ohoh, up ahead!" The disguised hellhound blurted out with a pointed finger, her fingernail inches away from jabbing at the windshield.

"Yeah, I see it," Jim said calmly, merging into the leftmost lane to prepare to enter onto the grounds.

A more accurate description of a place Loona hadn't heard before from Jim, more of the fast approaching property being revealed to her after they passed yet another line of houses and stores. As foretold by her escort, Loona took considerable note of the large uniquely-designed church standing proudly on the stone it was built on. Truly it wasn't like any other church she had seen; a grand, large white building that had a general profile of a horizontal rectangle. It had an emphasis on tall thin windows, and towering giant arches professionally masoned into the exterior wall, supported by Greekesque pillars rather than just plain straight edges. The humongous structure's roof was of similar eccentricity; a large central cylindrical chamber full of many windows and capped with a large golden dome, perched atop of which was a cross made of three horizontal cross-beams, the lowest one slanted. Built into the left side of this church was a tall bell tower roofed with a much smaller golden dome which featured a cross of its own, the belfry featuring a large iron bell, as well as what looked to be a series of smaller bells beside it. The arched entrance into the narthex, and subsequently the nave, was guarded by a set of large double oak doors, measuring up to what had to be ten foot high and eight foot wide, set undercover by the small entrance portico featuring a set of horizontal Greekesque support pillars. Completing the uniqueness of this 'House of God' was the inclusion of Cyrillic letters made of brass, all of which were aligned neatly above the entrance doorway to form a message — one which Loona couldn't read on account of her, well, not knowing Cyrillic.

Loona sank nervously into the leather-cushioned seat as Jim pulled the car into the short driveway leading into the church grounds, the ute heading straight past the four-foot stone wall which skirted around the entire property. The faded green cast iron gates which guarded the entrance were wide open, as though the church itself, with some form of otherworldly sentience of its own, expected them. At a sluggish pace, Jim carefully steers the silver pickup into one of the many free twenty parking spaces, the metaphorical curtains of the drive at last coming to a close at the pull of a handbrake, a shift of the gearstick, and a cutoff of the purring engine. Crunch time was now upon them.

"Ooough, my arse…" Jim complained with a drawn-out groan as he swung the door open and got out of his ute, the suspension shifting from the movement. He welcomed the outside world with open arms as his buttocks hurt from all of the sitting down, the fresh crisp air gracing his face like a kiss. After a long whining stretch, Jim leant back into the car and asked; "You coming out, Loona?"

Loona, however, stayed dormant. Her red-iris eyes remained fixed straight ahead at nothing in particular, her black lipstick-dressed lips pursed into a thin line, all the while she hugged herself timidly. It was as if she was frozen in time; in a time where thoughts and anxieties ran rampant in a wild flock. Of course Loona was terrified, why wouldn't she be?

Jim blinked and looked at his frozen passenger, deciding on what to say next. After a little bit of thought, he asked; "You gonna be alright?"

Loona nodded faintly in response, then squeaked in a restricted and wholly anxious breath; "I-I'll be fine, I just… Just composing myself, give me a minute." Luckily for her, Jim respected this request and shut the door, leaving the sole occupant to her own devices. Everything at that point felt like a blur as she focused on steadying her breath to a more relaxed, comfortable rate, a fear which she hadn't felt before to such an extreme degree fogging up her mind. Loona had to calm herself down and fast, resorting to the only way she fully knew how; she took her first deep, slow breath.

Breathe in… one, two, three… breathe out. … Breathe in… one two three… breathe out. … Thrice, breathe in… one, two, three… breathe out. … Another one for good measure, breathe in… one, two, three… and breathe out.

"Okay… O-Okay. I'm… I-I'm ready... I'm ready," Loona convinced herself after her much needed breathing exercises, indeed ready to leave the sanctuary of the car. She lightly fixed her hair up and took another deep breath, preparing to leave after much anxious debate.

With a newfound motivation to move, Loona swung the door open and stepped out into the outside world, the fresh, tranquil air greeting her with open arms as she looked around, surveying even more of the grounds she stood upon. Again, like the church, everything was just as foretold; there before Loona was a great area of luscious uniform grass, directly under the protective shade of a large, old oak tree. Underneath the long arching branches of this tree was indeed a statue on a pedestal, that of the effigy of a man. He was a regal-looking man with a full beard, dressed in a military uniform with all sorts of medals. His right hand rested staunchly upon the grip of his holstered sword, while his left rested beside a crown on its cushion, both of which sat atop a waist-high engraved column. A four-foot metal plaque stood before the statue, written in yet more of that Cyrillic language Loona unfortunately couldn't read.

With the desire to get herself used to the place, Loona paced around on the soft grass and strolled up to the dark gray statue, staring right up at his face which wore an expression that screamed of 'high stature' and 'purpose'. The longer Loona stared up at the face, the more she began to realize

just how familiar it looked. She squints her eyes and thought, wondering where exactly she had seen his face befo—

"Good morning!"

"Wh—?!" Loona's heart leapt right out of her chest as she spun around in a fright, turning towards where the shouting male voice had come from. Sure enough her eyes met with a figure coming out from the church's double doors, descending from the portico and shuffling his way towards the ground's newest visitors with steady progress. It was unmistakable to figure out who this old man was, with his chest-length long white beard and bushy graying eyebrows, along with his loose black cassock which was draped on him like a great robe, the look complete with a black skufia resting comfortably atop his head.

Jim called right back to the approaching figure, holding up one hand; "Is that you, Father Alexander!"

"Indeed it is!" The elderly cassock-dressed figure confirmed in his distinctive accent complete with a smile, his teeth showing from underneath his thick-bristle beard; "Mister James. Never thought I'd see you again, good sir!"

"It'll take more than death to keep me down," Jim cackled as he took off his hat in respect, locking hands with the old priest for a firm handshake.

After the handshake, the gentlemanly old Father Aleksander placed a delicate hand on the young Australian's forearm, patting it lightly as he asked out of the mercy of his heart; "And how is your health?"

"Ahh, I'm fine. Nothing to complain about. What about yourself, father, how's your knees?"

"My own flesh fails me, but my soul remains ever defiant," the graceful elderly priest affirmed with utmost confidence, nodding his head to further assert his commitment to struggling onwards; "Father Andrei looked after these grounds during my surgery, so it has been in good hands."

Breaking away from eye contact with the young man standing before him, Father Aleksander turns his head towards Loona who stood frozen, looking as though she felt very awkward. It was

painfully obvious that she didn't fit into her surroundings either, especially her attire; her tense and discomforted demeanor proved that she was highly aware of this. Loona's out of the ordinary appearance and awkward stance didn't hinder the elder's approach to her, however, who smiled in familiarity and outstretched his hand towards the distant and distinct young woman; "You there! Do come here, join us!"

"I… Uh, I… y-you want me to— wh…" Loona spluttered hopelessly, every single syllable she tried to pronounce dying awkwardly on her lips while a nervous sweat pooled on her brow.

Father Aleksander was still not in the slightest bit deterred from his invitation, waving his hand towards himself at Loona with insistence; "There's nothing to be afraid of here, I assure! Do come!"

"O…Okay?" At last Loona budged out of her paralyzation, shuffling timidly towards the insistent old man who stood there, patiently waiting for her to join him in conversation.

Soon enough the shy young woman linked back with the company of two, the patriarch's courteous, friendly smile remained unfaltered underneath his beard as he said to his visitor; "Now there's a face I remember. Yes, I know of you. We met in Brisbane, in the hall of that hospital."

"Yup. That's me," Loona nodded along with a forced smile; "It's.. nice to meet you again?"

"Same goes right to you," Father Aleksander softly greeted back in kind, his old eyes shifting between the two visitors to his holy grounds. Shifting eyes turned into fixated ones which locked particularly onto Loona, opening his mouth to speak; "I've been told," the patriarch began, "That you might be of interest to speak to. You might know the name of Vasily Antonov?"

"Oh boy, am I familiar," Loona let out a hefty sigh, nodding her head to confirm her knowledge of the name, and of course the man; "What's he said about me?"

Father Aleksander shrugged slowly; "He hasn't said much about you, per se, other than what I already speculate."

Loona raised one eyebrow; "Which is?"

“That you feel as if you are a misfit, as you told me so at the hospital,” the father explained; “As I said to Mister Antonov, and do not take this the wrong way, but I believe you are in search of truth.”

“Woah-woah-woah! Let me stop you right there,” Loona suddenly interjected and raised a finger; “If this is going to be some kind of “conversion” shit you’re gonna try on me, and to slap the ‘Word of God’ into my brain, then it’s not going to work. I’m not converting to squat.”

“And when did I ever suggest that?” A still calm and calculated Father Aleksander asked curiously, his calm and approachable demeanor seemingly unshakable, set in stone like top-notch masonry.

Despite the priest’s calm attitude, the young woman remained suspicious. Loona went on; “Because I know, I’ve heard all about it. I know what you’re gonna tell me. You’re gonna go on about all of that ‘Fire and Brimstone’ crap, and how “we’re all doomed” without the bible and whatever it is you guys go on about.”

Jim tried to intervene, whispering in the disguised hellhound’s ear; “I don’t think he’s one of those, Loona.”

Loona scoffed; “Oh I’m sure he isn’t.”

“If you’re going to make assumptions about me and the Faith, young lady, then at least get your facts correct.” Father Aleksander sounded staunch and confident in his voice, the sheer baritone it withheld in its nature commanding respect. His voice, however, still sounded kind and full of the milk of human kindness. Though Loona was still critical, she decided for whatever reason to hear him out. The priest explained; “I’m not here to convert you. That’s not my job, nor is it within my authority to do so. I am merely here to help you, to listen to what you want to say. Yes, I am a man of my Faith, but that also makes me a man of mutual understanding and support. You can believe it or not, but a good portion of people who come to me either do not believe in God outright, are agnostic, or just indifferent to the Faith. Nevertheless they still come to me for advice on all sorts of issues. If you want to walk out of these grounds without the answers and life advice that you might seek, then that’s entirely up to you. Again rest assured, I’m not here to convince you of anything. You wish to convert? That choice is entirely yours. I only ask that you ‘come and see’ — that is our doctrine.”

“What makes you think I want anything from you, advice or otherwise?” Loona squinted.

“Well you came, didn’t you?”

“Yeah okay I did! But that… I only wanted to— hm… Good point,” the disguised hellhound admitted, genuinely stumped by the priest’s open observation; “Okay, look! I just don’t want any of that preachy stuff, okay? REALLY not a fan of it if you know what I mean.”

“Young lady,” Father Aleksander said with as much assurance as humanly possible; “You have my word, I will not put that upon you. Do come along now, we shall converse further in my office.”

Loona furrowed her brow as she watched the elderly gentleman, not entirely sure what to make of him and his seemingly infinite tolerance; “Uh, sure. Where’s it at?”

“Just over here, inside the event hall,” Father Aleksander informed and waved Loona over to follow him, his cassock gently rippling in a brief gust of wind like a cloak.

Abiding by Vasily’s earlier over-the-phone advice of ‘not wasting the priest’s time’, Loona promptly followed in his literal footsteps, crossing over from the morning dew-coated grasses onto a stone-paved path glistening with moisture underneath the dayspring sun. And so the miniature entourage of two ambled along the tidy stone track with their newfound shepherd leading them, with Loona who cautiously dragged her feet along, followed directly behind the sauntering old man who held an outward, humbly exalted peace. The priest’s calm, almost self-humiliative nature confused the undercover hellhound; why was he so calm? She had pretty much insulted him, and his response was to go ahead with his meeting with her? Any other sane-minded person would’ve booted her out in an instant — Boom! Just like that! Sent home! That’s what Bee did when Loona tried to defend Blitz after all, and she was the nicest ‘Sin’ out of all of them — at least that was until Loona got passive aggressive. So why was this old patriarch, unshakable in his conviction of the world and of his faith, different in his approach? Why such tolerance? The hellhound figured that to be a question to ask him later, that is if the opportunity to do so ever arises.

For now the question was sidelined when Loona saw that she was fast approaching the ‘Event Hall’. It wasn’t a very large hall, truly, with a capacity of what had to be fifty people at most from a rough estimate. The design wasn’t much to behold, either, though it did look appealing to the eye; an undercover entrance way like a “sub-room” attached to the main hall itself, the exterior walls painted a flat, warm cream coloration, along with many white-painted arched windows spanning its length, all complete with a simple dark green roof. Furthermore, Loona could see that off towards the rear of the building there was yet another extension roughly double the size of the ‘Entrance Room’, the eccentric female visitor figuring that what she was looking at were the foretold offices. At once Father Aleksander led both his visitors beyond the double wooden doors of the entrance,

and straight through into the ‘Event Hall’ itself. Now Loona wasn’t sure what to expect of the interior, but it certainly was not the prestigious ballroom-esque inside complete with a built-in stage and gold chandeliers which she ended up discovering. The walls were painted in a pleasant darker shade of cream, almost a beige, with paintings and mosaics upon the walls ripped right out of a prestigious art gallery. Loona wasn’t here to admire the interior decoration, that much was certain as she continued to follow the priest who had barely lost momentum — so much for his apparent knee problems. The priest led both Loona and Jim through yet another door, this one being singular, which led into a short hallway and into what appeared to be a small lobby of sorts — a waiting room.

After much walking, Father Aleksander stopped and turned around to face Loona, gesturing his hand towards another door which stood behind him; “Right through there is my office,” the priest told the young woman; “Unfortunately there’s only two chairs in there, and there isn’t much room. Unless Mister James wants to wait out here?”

“Yeah, no worries,” Jim said in agreement; “It’s a private matter between you and Loona, anyway. Is that alright with you, Loona, or do you want me to come in with you?”

“No no, I’ll be fine,” Loona avowed with a little hesitancy, then turned to the priest and said; “I’m ready.”

And with that, the meeting began.

The door to Father Aleksander’s office squeaked open as Loona was led in, the old priest hobbling around to his side of the desk once he had shut the door. “So tell me, Loona,” Father Aleksander began as he sat in his black office chair; “What exactly brings you here, other than the invitation?”

Loona wasn’t sure of what the elder meant, promptly asking; “What do you mean? Sorry, I don’t think I understand.”

The patriarch shrugged with his hands and elaborated; “Well I’m sure you came here to see me for a reason. You’re not here to admire the architecture, are you?”

“Pfft! No, not really,” Loona admitted in a light laugh, looking down at the desk as she struggled to maintain eye contact — she was nervous.

Father Aleksander gave a look as if he already knew this. He continued in a soothing, almost paternal voice; “What you told me at the hospital, in regards to you feeling like a misfit, is that still true?”

“Woah, okay. Straight to the point, huh?” Loona remarked with a feigned grin, feeling that discomfort within her rise up again; “I’m gonna be frank, I’m really shi— I MEAN, r-really bad at admitting stuff like that. But yeah, it’s… pretty sure it’s still true.”

“Do you wish to tell me why?”

“Right, before I answer that, I have one question for you. Why are you being so nice to me?”

“Who’s to say you don’t deserve kindness?”

Loona was quick to become incredulous, baffled by the old man’s humble response; “Uhh, my attitude from earlier?? Like come on, I insulted you in your face! I insulted you, your religion; everything! And you’re still being nice to me, giving me the time of day.”

Father Aleksander remained unphased; “Loona, trust me. My people and fellow clergymen over the centuries have faced far worse persecution and ridicule — even death,” the patient old gentleman said with much confidence, his general aura still resonating that of mildness and mutual respect for the confused young woman as a person; “By far, you are the tamest of them all.”

Loona was left even more puzzled, unsure of whether to take the priest’s words as a compliment or an insult. Nevertheless, her question had been answered one way or another, even if said answer did leave her in a state of utter confusion. The face-to-face talk lived on, thanks to Loona diverting back to Father Aleksander’s earlier question. She blinked and said; “O-Okay, that’s nice. Thank you? Anyway, yeah, um, so back to your question. Um… Man, I don’t know. Really, I don’t know, I just feel like I don’t fit. I never really felt like I have, you know? Just a misfit stumbling through life, going from one blow to another. The feeling’s more intense now because I know things most people I know… don’t. By the way, do you know why Jim was in hospital in the first place, like what led up to that?”

“Not necessarily, only what I was told by Mister Antonov,” Father Aleksander wasn’t shy to admit his lack of insight; “But do tell me.”

“Just a lot of crazy things. A lotta crazy things,” Loona confessed, purposefully being vague; “‘Cause I was with him the entire time he was “missing”, trying to protect him, myself, and everyone I ever loved. I learnt a lot from it, a lot of which I don’t think I was prepared to hear. It’s like… my world’s been turned upside down.”

“The truth is terrifying. It’s uncomfortable.”

“No kidding…” Loona reflected as she let out a drawn out sigh, thinking of everything from Lucifer to the ‘Sins’ themselves. The questions of “why” and suspicions she had of Hell’s ‘powers that be’ began to resurface like a sea monster of Greek myth, rearing its head from the depths of some foul underwater cavern. Bee’s excuse for Mammon’s explosive reaction echoed inside Loona’s head, the Queen of Gluttony’s words sounding more serious than ever. There was an open secret down in Hell, but an open secret which obviously had other more monumental confidentialities unknown to hellborn. But was a hellborn such as Loona prepared to know?

A long, reflective silence filled the air as both priest and undercover hellhound sat stagnant. Loona diverted her eyes away from Father Aleksander to look outside through a small window built into the left wall. From it, she could see the great white church clear as day, as well as the adequately maintained gardens, and the stone wall which wrapped around the entire church property. From beyond the short wall, Loona could see the steady flow of traffic full of thousands of people, each and everyone with their own lives and experience. Everyone had their own experiences which shaped how they thought and who they are; Loona was certainly no exception.

Suddenly distracting the visitor full of deep reflection was the sound of a light thud atop the desk. She turned her head back towards the priest to find that a tall, dark glass bottle now rested on the surface, the priest right in the middle of fetching two glasses which he placed beside the glass magnum.

Loona gawked at the tall dark bottle, asking out of piqued interest; “What’s that?”

“It’s red wine,” Father Aleksander informed, then spoke of its name; “‘Mavrodaphne of Patras’. Would you care for some?”

“Isn’t that against your book?”

“Young lady, the apostles drank wine,” the priest refuted as he poured a minuscule serving of both glasses, consisting of a few drops worthy of no more than a swig. As Father Aleksander generously

slid Loona's glass towards her, he duly noted; "It sounds to me as if you're mixing up the faith with the doctrine of the Mormons of America. By chance, and I don't mean to sound abrupt, were you raised as one?"

"Oh no-no, not at all! Thankfully not," Loona grinned as she picked up her glass of red wine, analyzing the serving of alcohol with a keen, careful eye. It was a deep, slick red, like the texture of cherry juice or a rich dark-crimson lipstick straight from the most expensive of makeup varieties. But was it any good? Alas, there was only one way to find out. With mind fixated on taste buds, Loona took a generous sip of her drink, swallowing the whole thing in one hearty tip of the glass.

"It's good, yes?"

Loona's response left no doubt, swishing the wine in her mouth before swallowing; "Mm! It's strong, that's to say the least."

"Indeed it is. But yes, we are allowed to drink wine. Wine is an essential part of the faith, believe it or not."

"Right, gotcha. So then why do some say it's a grave sin, or whatever?"

"Deception," Father Aleksander answered simply, at last sipping a morsel from his wine glass; "One of the most powerful forms of manipulation known to man. It's the devil's greatest tool."

A deep huff came from Loona in response; "Tell me about it…" she muttered in all seriousness, having all but forgotten the 'father of lies' and his deal with that wretched sinner.

Before either occupant of the office knew it, the time for this 'happy hour' condensed into no more than a minute came and went, the real reason as to why Loona was here demanding attention. The pressing issue at hand wasn't going to be resolved through wilful avoidance, that much was for certain, and if anything would only make the disguised hellhound's questions intensify. Personal internal burdens were never fun to carry, and the old patriarch, like a doctor tending to a wound, was there to dress it.

With this in mind, Father Aleksander pursued the issue: "But anyhow," the knowledgeable old man digressed; "Yes. The truth is discomforting, especially when it comes after a time of great struggle.

So out of anything, what is it that you want?”

The question hit hard; harder than anything that had been asked unto Loona up until now. What is it that she wanted? After some quiet reflection to herself, she looked back up to the priest, and confessed. “I want to find my place,” Loona admitted with sincere sober emotion, her voice flat but full of truth; “All I want to know is who I am, where I fit in this crazy world full of batshit insane people… and to just feel safe for once. That’s all I want. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve got people out there who care for me and whatnot, but they’re powerless just like me. We’re all in the same damn boat with no hope of getting out.”

“So you wish to have sanctuary.”

Loona let off a quiet and reserved nod, her eyes almost pleading for a viable, sustainable answer.

Father Aleksander hauled himself up from his chair and shuffled towards the bookcase behind him. As his hand searched around the shelves, the old man said; “You’re not the first to yearn for sanctuary, Loona, nor will you be the last. It is, indeed, a long search for some, and a near impossible task for many others.”

The patriarch’s hand stops on the topmost shelf, his fingers clasping around a black photo album with gold borders which he pulled out, then at once returns to the desk with the article in his grip. It lands lightly on the varnished surface with a dull “thump” as Father Aleksander sat down, who then opens the black leather cover to reveal photos of various ages and conditions. Loona eyed the pages curiously as the priest flicked through them in an obvious search for a specific photo, the hellhound catching glimpses of pictures in black-and-white and sepia; that of foreign rolling hills, a wide flowing river, and villages full of wooden houses and dirt roads. Before too long, and after half-a-dozen skipped album pages, Father Aleksander came across one specific page; one which contained a singular large photo.

The priest stares down at the black-and-white artifact in a moment of silent, solemn reflection before uttering; “Sometimes it even takes an entire ocean to find safety.”

At once he spun the album around and pushed it towards the opposite end of the desk so Loona could see it. What it was was a photo of a small flotilla of ships, all of almost identical design and shape, obviously taken from an on-shore position. From the position that these unsuspecting ships were taken in, they all seemed to have just left for departure, sailing sluggishly out to sea on some unknown voyage — at least that was Loona’s initial assumption. She inspected the photograph with

a focused but mildly confused eye, wondering quietly to herself why exactly Father Aleksander was showing this particular one off.

All was revealed, starting in the form of a question; “Look here, at this photograph. Do you know what this is of?”

“It’s a… bunch of ships??” Loona guessed in an uncalculated way as she looked up from the artifact, only seeing it for what it was at the simplest of face value.

“Yes. A bunch of ships they are,” Father Aleksander said nodding his head slowly; “Destroyer Ships to be exact, all of the last flotilla out of Vladivostok. There was a war, a bloody civil war, which all took place in one blood-soaked catastrophe roughly one-hundred years ago. As with all wars, millions of people were displaced, including my own family who came from a long line of horseback soldiers and clergymen. Because of my family’s allegiances and unshakable beliefs, we became ‘misfits’ in a new emerging society and thus we were forced to flee. With no other option, my family escaped far eastwards and left in exile through the means of this very flotilla.”

“Oh— O-Ohhh… Oh shit,” Loona muttered to herself in an awful realization.

“‘Oh shit’ indeed,” Father Aleksander agreed with a faint solemn smile, finding light humor in Loona’s sincerest reaction; “But yes, on one of these ships was my grandfather from the city formerly known as Tsaritsyn: Dimitri Gregorivich Chatkin. It was a long, arduous journey, but eventually he found his way here, then married around ten years later to my grandmother. Now I bring this up because I want to let you know that you’re not alone. On a personal level, I understand how it feels to live in exile, to feel as though you don’t belong.”

“You know what? That’s a really good way to put it,” Loona stated in mild surprise; “It is like I’m living in exile, but in a “mental exile” if you get what I mean.”

The priest nodded affirmatively; “I do. Which is why I want to help you, and I might have just the solution.” As he began to speak of his ‘solution’, Father Aleksander pulled out a small piece of paper and began writing down on it what looked to Loona like an address accompanied by a phone number. Without saying another word, the old man folded the slip of paper and handed it over to its intended recipient, the recipient in question taking it with mild hesitation. She unfolds the paper and finds what was, indeed, an address and a phone number, authored down in black ink from a ballpoint pen.

After examining the series of words and numbers written down with a light squint, Loona looked up and asked; “W-What is this?”

“We have a “youth function” coming up in two days, at the stroke of six in the evening,” the priest earnestly explained; “It is for anyone between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five to attend. If indeed that’s your thing, you’re more than welcome to join us here in the event hall — that address is this place here.”

“‘Youth Function’, huh? … I’ll think about it,” Loona concluded as she folded it back up, tucking it safely into the back of her phone case; “There’s not gonna be any of that “Kumbaya” kinda schtick there, right?”

This provoked a wheezing laugh to seep out from Father Aleksander as he shook his head. With a sweeping hand to ease Loona’s concern, he promised with certainty; “Nono, not at all! If we wished to start doing that, we would have to start calling ourselves a summer camp.”

Suddenly Loona let out a soft chuckle of her own as she got up from her seat, preparing to leave; “Let’s hope it stays that way!” She remarked, pushing her chair back into the position from whence she found it, all the while Father Aleksander remained seated.

“I wish you the best, Loona! Hopefully I see you this Friday,” the humble old patriarch bade his most sincerest of farewells.

“Thanks,” Loona gave thanks as she opened the door to leave. Just as she stepped halfway out, the undercover hellhound froze, pivoting her head back towards a still seated Father Aleksander. She said one final thing before linking back up outside with Jim, letting off a hint of a faint but appreciative smile; “Oh, and… thanks for the talk. It’s good to know that I’m not alone in a sense.”

Father Aleksander gave one final word of wisdom to his visitor before she finally left; “We all experience loneliness in some form or another. What matters is how we scrutinize it, and from there, what we do to nurse that ailment.”

Powers That Be

He was a decrepit and arrogant shell of his former self, this so-called “Ruler of Hades”, a damned eternal prisoner of his own eternal realm. A “king” only by name, residing in a “kingdom” which he barely called his own; how could he if he wanted to, considering the fact that entire sections of hell were run by either the ‘Sins’, organized crime syndicates, or in Pride’s case by numerous ‘Overlords’? All that this solitary, lonely man had control over were the minimal stirrings within the walls of his gargantuan palace, hidden away from the outside world and never to be seen like some beastly, reclusive count. However at the end of the day, no matter how much he was reluctant to flaunt his title, this strictly unaccompanied hermit was this realm’s ruler, with bare minimum responsibilities which he forced upon himself in order to ‘keep going’. He needed something to live for, after all, and all he had was infinite time — such was the nature of his banishment.

Lucifer, this brooding figure and grandmaster of deception, had lost much sleep. Rest is a luxury which seldom many people can afford to lose, especially those of great authority where concentration and alertness is a must. This crucial ‘must’, however, never came to the devil himself, who had been lying within his bed on his back for the past eight hours; out of those hours during which he lay dormant, only two were spent in sleep. The result was a sickly, tense looking man, his eyes irritated and bloodshot from a nauseating, potent concoction of restlessness, anxiety, and malice, and a body that felt to him like a burdensome lead weight complimented by cast iron chains. And so it was that Lucifer gazed blankly up at the high ceiling of his dead silent bedroom, his mind still gravely troubled from the day before and in spite of the fatigue refused to silence itself. After hours upon hours of trying to fall asleep to little, pitiful avail, the “king of Hades” at last capitulated — he was going to stay awake and that was that.

“*Hhrrrgh.. Mmmmrgh…*” Lucifer began to stir after having lay dormant in the same position for up to an hour, a horrendous ache shooting through his muscles from having to shift himself into a more upright position. His eyes of sandpaper ached as they peered through the darkness in a strain, glancing up at the wall clock above the entrance door: “Fifteen past four”, it read with its two etched golden hands upon a white clock face with Roman numerals. The time stuck out to Lucifer in a highly painful way, almost mocking him for the lack of prolonged sleep his body received. Of course it mocked him, why wouldn’t it? Everyone mocked him.

The lead weight that was Lucifer’s tired body protested as his feet sluggishly made contact with the ground, forcing himself to get out of bed and prepare for his snap meeting. Unlike other meetings before, this one was strictly reserved for three participants only: Beelzebub, Mammon, and himself as the host. In a deliberate act, Lucifer had decided to keep the situation unbeknownst to the rest of the ‘Sins’, at least until he saw it fit for them to know. This was to prevent any undue alarm from spreading amongst the higher ranks and consequently the general populace, unless of course the state of the issue at hand changed for the worse. It was a mammoth task to regather his shattered bearings, but sure enough the inner proverbial mechanisms which kept this wretched fallen being articulate whirred into motion, the series of grunts and groans he let out a testament to his advancing ancient age as his feet stumbled across the floor.

At the pace of a disheveled slug in its death throes and the coordination of a blind rodent, Lucifer shuffled over to his prestigious wooden wardrobe and swung the doors open with both clambering hands. Built into the inward-side of the right wardrobe door was a vertical mirror, giving the ‘king of Hades’ a “grand” old look of himself. As suspected, he looked horrible; a tired old man of many centuries struggling on like a dying animal which openly defied death himself, a foreigner to the definition of ‘mortality’. Just above the mirror was a light bulb with a string as a means to turn it on, one that Lucifer pulled to check himself out further, the sudden change in lighting stinging the devil’s sandpaper eyes. Through a squint he peered at himself, examining his bleached-white face and matted brown hair, streaks of gold running through a select few strands which he had implanted himself. These streaks, along with his unnaturally white skin, were both telltale signs of his adamance against accepting his fate, having never given up on his desires even after thousands of centuries.

Amongst all of his obsessions he had developed since his fall, Lucifer’s greatest was ‘perfection’, but a perfection to which he could call his own. He wanted to mimic what he once had, the grandeur which he possessed, and he sought this replication in everything; from the clothes on his back to the strands in his hair. All attempts, however, became crude mockeries. He hated this. Like an attentive biologist with a microscope, Lucifer browsed every bit of his facial features, leaving no cell out of his inspecting eyes. His hand too tracked along his face, starting from his hairline to his forehead, down to his brow… his eyelids… his cheekbones… his bleached teeth… down to his lower jaw and chin… then at last… arriving down to his… neck.

“Wh—… Hh.. No… h-hhhah… Nonono, shi— n-no…” Lucifer’s eyes widened and his breath began to quake as he noticed ‘it’, that dreaded ‘it’. ‘It’ was an imperfection; a horrible, unacceptable imperfection, that of the form of a patch of dark red wrinkled skin, sticking right out of his neck like a weeping cancerous mole.

“No… nonono, *no no no — **NO.***”

In a panic, the devil rustled through the wardrobe’s inner drawers in a haste, rummaging desperately for a solution as if his life depended on it. The sound of shuffling around filled the still air as the frantic search continued, before at last ending at the bottom-most draw where Lucifer’s much needed answer lay. A long flask with a needle rocked from the draw being pulled with force, a quaint black liquid swirling around within it like a highly malleable tar.

“Hoh! Yesyesyes, come on, c-come o–*guh*.. Come on!”

Like a child to a tin of sweets, the horribly desperate husk hungrily grabbed the needle in his tendril-like fingers, the adrenaline pumping through his veins the cause for a near debilitating tremor. Without a second thought, the obsessive deceiver rolled up the sleeve of his pajama shirt and dug the needle right into his forearm. An explosive shock ran like static electricity throughout Lucifer's entire cadaverous form, the damned king wholly indulging in the ecstasy of the glass vial's blissful medicine. In turn the unsightly blemish vanished as quickly as the bearer of the burden had noticed it, at once transforming into yet another patch of excessively white skin. At last, "perfection" had been restored.

With the devil's 'normality' saved, he began to dress himself for the no doubt tumultuous day ahead. He peeled the nightwear off his near skeletal frame before throwing on his white shirt and trousers, a pair of even whiter socks pulled over his feet. Lucifer was quick to button his shirt, lest he see the horrid scar running across from his right shoulder down to his thigh, a staunch reminder of the blade which struck him, sending him plummeting to his permanent realm — a scar which, on occasion, still seeped. Then came his waistcoat and overcoat respectively, both of the same bleached nature as his skin, except for the dark red pentagram sewn into the overcoat's left breast. Last but not least, Lucifer threw on a pair of his best black polished boots, tucking the legs of his trousers right into them. Then came his hat; his tall white hat with a simple red band, a series of otherworldly patterns and symbols etched intricately into the fabric.

Finally, he was ready.

At once with as much energy as he could muster, Lucifer shut the wardrobe and made his way outside. He stepped out into one of the many prestigious hallways which made up the palace, a true architectural testament of his self-absorbance and the position to which he withheld. The decorated high ceiling walls with remarkable masonry and mind-boggling mosaics shone with a yellowish hue from the chandeliers which hung high above, casting Lucifer's long dark shadow which danced against the decorations. A centuries-long loneliness hung in the air like the smell of a rotting carcass, unpleasant and bitter in its nature. Such was the saddening nature of the king's seclusion, every waking second an opportunity to brood and ponder. He was alone, alright; except of course for one other man.

The clack of footsteps echoed through the dead silent hall as a lone figure quickly approached. This particular figure was one which Lucifer instantly recognized, and expected; an imp who had been by his side as his most loyal counselor for nearly one-hundred years, the one hundred and seventy-seventh of this highly important title. He was a notable specimen of an imp, considerably taller than his fellow brethren at his height of exactly six feet, dwarfing the vast majority of any other imp that came across him. Equally as imposing as the privy councelor's height were his facial features; a square-jawed head with a sharp chin with sharp eyes to match, a full head of hair with bushy white mutton chops jutting out from his cheeks. His black and white horns pointed directly upwards like a pair of sharply pointed spires, extending at least two feet above his head. Most august of all was his sharply tailored uniform; a white dress shirt with frilled cuffs worn underneath a maroon waistcoat

and black tie, complete with a pearl-white dinner jacket and suit trousers, all complete with a pair of adequately polished shoes.

With an upright posture the tall imp strides as he headed towards his master, keeping up his outward dignity with great ease. Once at an acceptable distance, the privy councilor greets; “I bid forth to you a good morning, Sire.”

“And so you have, Mister Tarenk,” the glum-faced king responded accordingly in a voice which rumbled like stone, his hands held together in a grip behind his white-cladded back. He sighed heavily before stating; “If only it was forsooth a ‘good morning’.”

“What troubles you so, o sire?” ‘Mister Tarenk’ inquired in quite the formal manner, not once compromising his strict formal persona as he walked leisurely alongside his master. Both of their steps were perfectly in time while advancing down the great prestigious hallway, as if their movements were deliberately in complete synchronization. Such was the century-long camaraderie between Lucifer and Privy Councilor Tarenk, the presence of whom the wretched king got used to outside of the trimonthly meeting with all nine ‘Sins’.

Lucifer grumbled like a disgruntled bear, then said in a wallow of self-pity; “Alas, Grand Councilor, at which hour has’t I not been troubled? A most wondrous many things afflict my mind at this waking hour. Mammon hast reported yond of a strange burn upon his hand, hence the urgent meeting within the hour, and I’m afraid mine own facade is failing for the umpteenth time.”

“So you have told me,” the ‘Grand Councilor’ acknowledged respectfully, then suggested out of all helpfulness; “By chance, according to your calculated judgment, would increasing your dosage of *‘Supplementum Pellis’* be required?”

Alas, the chronically troubled king shook his head; “Nay idea,” he replied glumly; “I suppose it be a mere flare up, at least yond is what I desire. Alas, that is my infliction, the burden which is necessary for myself to bear.”

The respectful and diligent imp nodded along; “And so it is,” he quietly but clearly remarked, before pausing to give himself and his master a moment of stillness. Before too long, ‘Mister Tarenk’ spoke once more; “And to where shall I escort thee this morn’, sire?”

“Straight to mine own studyeth, Mister Tarenk, if’t be true thee couldst,” Lucifer requested earnestly. That was when a spontaneous thought crossed his mind; “Is there aught on the regular

agenda, Grand Councilor?"

"That there is. There is the organization of finances which must be attended to according to the "*'Grant of Rings' Law of 785*". Next upon thy agenda is the management of distributed convicts in the Wrath Labor Prison System, in accordance with the "*'Criminality Act' of 156*". Third in its position, also, is the issue of your daughter."

A visible look of annoyance appeared upon Lucifer's face, his exhausted eyes rolling upwards towards the ceiling. There was an almost dismissive grunt which emanated from the 'king of Hades' before reluctantly inquiring; "And what does *she* want?"

Seldom a reaction to Lucifer's obvious annoyance was conjured from Grand Councilor Tarenk, who knew not to respond in kind nor to cower to his master's temper. Without any ado, the imp informed; "Your daughter has requested that you grant upon her another wage of up to six-thousand dollars. The lady has stated to me that it will be purposed for—"

"The Hotel…" Lucifer sneered disdainfully as the words slid out of his mouth like a putrid rotten sludge, putting emphasis on the words as though what he spoke of was derogatory; "That no more brain than stone, accursed, time-depleting **HOTEL!!**" The devil exploded into a rage, his voice ricocheting off the walls and high ceiling like a thunder; "For fuck's sake, that witless daughter of mineth and her pipedream! The lady clings onto it so desperately as if it be true that her very life depends upon that very accursed thing succeeding!! I am trying my hardest to runneth this realm, Mister Tarenk, and what is the lady busy doing?? ***CONFOUND HER AND HER DAYDREAM***, trying to make the wretched and the damned into betterments of themselves when it is a doomed venture! What is her aim, to deprive my realm of subjects? To depress me even further?! That *girl*, that… *Charlie*... the lady never speaks to me, except to ***BEGETH HER FATHER FOR WAGE!!***"

In spite of his liege's explosive, voluptuous outburst of fierce rage akin to an intensely burning inferno, Councilor Tarenk listened quietly, his stone-faced expression having not changed, not even by a mere inch. An eerie stillness took hold of the air in the absence of Lucifer's aggressive, scornful rantings, with only the sound of echoing footfall accompanying the king and his most loyal servant. Soon Lucifer had stifled himself and returned to his usual cold, calculated demeanor, replying simply to his daughter's request; "Sayeth unto Charlie that she is to receive nay more than two-thousand dollars for the month. If it be true that the mistress so desires to entertain herself with such a fruitless venture, then so be it. There art far larger concerns for me to wend about paying mind to."

"It shall be done," Mister Tarenk completed with Lucifer's wish, turning his head back towards the direction he was going.

Just up ahead was the end of the gargantuan hallway, a wide doorway which led into Lucifer's main living quarters, made up of the most luxurious of couches, lamps, tables, drawers, and even more remarkable paintings all totaling up to the billions. The large fireplace flickered with a hot green light as Lucifer, being escorted by his walked right past, heading towards the set of double doors to the rightmost side of it. Like a steward serving a dinner guest, Mister Tarenk opened the door for the 'king of Hades'; "Alas, we have arrived," he said in his unshakable formal demeanor.

"Thanketh thee, Grand Councilor," Lucifer expressed with a slight nod of his head; "Wouldst thee mind leaving me be? I wish to be alone until Beelzebub and Mammon arrive. At whichever hour they arrive, inviteth them in post-haste."

"Of course, sire," Mister Tarenk agreed wilfully, maintaining his hold of the door as the devil in white meandered right into his study, both hands clasped firmly together behind his back.

The grand paneled wooden door shut with a thunderous rumble behind Lucifer as he pondered a deep ponder, the warm light of the glowing chandelier above his head reflecting in his narrowed eyes. Shelves upon shelves of ancient books lined the tall bookcases on either side of their accursed owner, all of which were full of various languages; some novel, others old, and some which had been completely buried underneath the sands of time. Standing in the backmost part of the study was Lucifer's desk, his black leather tall-backed chair neatly tucked in and awaiting for his inevitable arrival. At last Lucifer waltzed on over and slumped himself into his seat, having heaved his body the entire way there. His lead-weighted eyes still pained from his lackluster amount of sleep as they struggled to remain open, begging desperately for the mercy of sleep. All that prevented this exhausted, languished liege from having his head topple into his desk was the strength of his left hand, propping the jaw of his lopsided head up and his elbow pressed against the desk.

In a state of utter delirium provoked by the intensities of stress, Lucifer began to murmur; "And so I walketh this path cutteth into the valley of death, misery, rancor, and resentment — this dismal ground of Hades. I knoweth nay rest, nay happiness, nay satisfaction, and all yond stands in its lodging is suffering and internal rot. The world stands before mineself and laughs, cackling oh-so tremendously at mine own eternal struggle, fleering everything yond stands against the misplaced righteousness of those above. A daughter I hath raised from the ground upwards in the absence of the fruitful tenderness of mother, and how doest the lady repay mine own work? Ungratefulness. Putrid, unadulterated ungratefulness. … Treason. … Mm-Hmph. Alas, I has't longeth wondered wherefore I alloweth her to continueth her confused game. Is't guilt yond I feeleth? A humor of pity upon mine owneth daughter? … Perhaps I shalt never knoweth, destined to roam upon such thoughts liketh the decrepit lost hound yond I am. Beshrew yond daughter of mineth, pursuing dreams which shalt never cometh to fruition."

The simple act of holding his head upright was growing cumbersome for Lucifer, prompting him to fall back into his chair for relief. His eyes grew increasingly unfocused as he gazed off into nothingness, the space between his eyelids growing ever thinner as he continued to ramble aimlessly to himself; “Fie. Again mine own weary corse art consumed by the desire to falleth asleep, falling backeth into yond veil of darkness liketh mine own ultimate descent into this wretched realm. O sleep, I implore thee to guideth me into thy comforting warmth. Thy tranquility, thy peace, thy… relief… And anon, I… I rest…”

KNOCK—KNOCK—KNOCK!! *“Hey Lucifah! Lucifah mate, you in there?”* … ***KNOCK—KNOCK—KNOCK—KNOCK—KNOCK—KNOCK!!*** *“Hellooo??”*

“*SNRK!!* W-What in the–?!” Lucifer awoke in a fright to the sound of loud knocking, sending him into a state of shock. It was only after darting his eyes around in a panic did he realize where he was, and who exactly was at the door; “Wh… oh… Ough, for fuck sake… come in, Mammon, the door’s unlocked!” As he invited in his two expected guests, the ‘king of Hades’ lazily snaps his fingers, causing two chairs to spontaneously appear on the opposite side of his desk.

Like a loyal dog obeying the call of his master, Mammon in all of his glory appeared from beyond the door, inviting himself in with a very noticeable pained look on his face. The causation for the Sin of Gluttony’s visible discomfort was obvious, his topmost left hand covered in a series of thick white bandages; this was his much spoken about injury. Following right in behind Mammon was Beelzebub, a serious and concerned look held upon her face as she entered into the study, then politely closing the door behind her. Though the so-titled ‘Queen of Gluttony’ was level-headed and calm in face of the pressing issue at hand, the same couldn’t be said for her ‘Greed’ counterpart who was bubbling with rancor.

Like the hothead he was, Mammon began flinging half-mumbled curses as he sat down; “Rrgh.. I swear, that little rotten cunt… I’ll have her fileted alive for what she did! Yes, I’ll make her fucken family watch, too, then do the same to them…”

“Mammon, please…” Bee pleaded as she sat down in her respective chair beside the sulking fellow quad-armed Sin, trying to convince Mammon to remain calm and collected. Aside from ruling her own ring, having to correct her counterpart’s behavior whenever she was within his presence was almost a full-time job for Bee, and often her patience wore thin.

Alas her attempts to reason with the portly authority turned out fruitless, the stubborn and crass embodiment of Greed insistent on remaining disgruntled. In a rather insulting way, Mammon

grunted at Bee in dismissal of her plea, then turned to Lucifer for some form of validation. With a highly demanding voice, he states firmly; “If this mornin’ doesn’t result in that bitch’s hide being torn from her little gray-and-white arsehole, I’m calling this meeting a scam! We hit that mutt hard, and we hit her fast, make an example of her!”

In contrast to his earlier combustive outburst, and to Mammon’s current lust for revenge, Lucifer remained calm. His words slid out like a rattlesnake from his den as he said; “Mammon. I hast never putteth you in charge of aught other than thy leadership of Greed because you make a constant ass of yourself. Let us not rush such things.”

“B-But! But look what she did to my—”

“***QUIET.*** I’m talking,” Lucifer commanded with utmost authority; “I don’t expect you to possess many brains, but I doth expect thee to have some manifestation of strategic bethinking. We have to discuss this, cometh to a logical conclusion, and thus a solution, so yond nothing is blown out of proportion. Nonetheless, something is amiss here. I’m sure we all know this.”

There was a collective silent nod in agreement from the pair of visitors. Perhaps the word ‘amiss’ was a fatal understatement on Lucifer’s part, easily replaced with an alternative word which carried significantly more severity and impact. Seldom in the centuries upon centuries-long history of Hell and its Rings has there been such an incident where the powers that be were impacted physically by a confrontation, let alone from a ‘lesser’ form of life such as the hellhound culprit.

Just as things fell silent, Lucifer outstretched his hand across the table towards Mammon and flexed his skeletally thin fingers; “May I see the wound?”

Mammon blinked as he flinched hesitantly at the idea; “W-What?”

“If we are to come to an adequate conclusion, I need to inspect your injury,” Lucifer replied with his eyes glaring into Mammon’s, the look of which told the Sin not to disobey; “Now come, bring forth your hand.”

With great reluctance and pain, Mammon inches his hand towards Lucifer for a closer look, wincing in agony with each flinch as the wrapping around his wound is slowly unfurled. It was like peeling off the premature shedding off a sodden, writhing serpent with the way the bandages slipped off with a sickly wet crackling sound, like the bandages were indeed a part of Mammon’s skin. The Sin of Greed cried out as more of the wound was revealed, using his free right hands to

desperately grip Bee's outstretched palms of support at the cost of the Sin of Gluttony's own comfort. It was only when the last remnants of the bandage were swiped away did the agonizing process finally subside, with Mammon letting out one final yodel of pain as his burn became fully unveiled. Lucifer's sharp analytical eye at once started inspecting the Sin's trauma with much morbid curiosity, as was accustomed for the damned king to become most interested in, though this time a sense of tight seriousness aromated off the context of this specific injury. Like in a calculated sequence, Lucifer experienced an internal yet obvious journey of feelings and emotions; what started as curiosity metamorphosed into skepticism, then faint recognition, realization, before finally mutating into gravely concerned disbelief.

There was good reason for the devil's reaction too, for what he discovered the injury to resemble in its makeup was oh-so sickeningly familiar. This deeply-singed burn possessed a series of strange streaks sprouting outwards across Mammon's palm, made up of jagged lines, edges, and barely visible scorch marks which resembled otherworldly engravings and intelligence-inspired patterns. Lucifer's mouth sat slack in silence, realizing at that moment that he had seen such horribly familiar patterns before, though only once… but from where exactly, he was too afraid to guess in fear of being correct. Lucifer snatched his nervous trembling hands away from the display as a fearful sweat pooled on his brow, then buried his head right into his damp palms, muttering to himself with inadequate coherence.

"Nay… Nay, this mustn't be true… this is— this is a forswear… *mmmrarghonnnacah*—the wound engults thou flesh… yond mangy, lowly, lesser mistress itches to maim… she itches to maim, and alas the lady didst… *nay*... nay, this is a dissemble… an elaborate… a-an elaborate trick… Aye, this is what this is… it's a… a-a deceptive dissemble this wilt beest from the hellhound!" A blood-chilling grin grew like fast growing vines across Lucifer's bleached face. His head meagrely raised up from his palms and eyes upturned towards both Mammon and Beelzebub sitting across the desk, the pair of whom gave each other quiet glances over Lucifer's troubled murmurings and attempts to rationalize. With his eyes glaring wide-eyed and crazed towards the fellow powers that be, Lucifer gave his verdict on the matter; "My friends… Mine own dearest cater-cousins… The both of thee, nay… we. Aye, we hast been played as a trio of daws! Morons! Fopped by yond clever dram mutt! This young, conniving mistress hath used charm against thee, Mammon, and deceived you! Yes, *that* is it! She gave herself the illusion of power harnessed from beyond this realm!"

Mammon, however, wasn't convinced, shaking his head frantically and full of personal conviction; "Excuse me, what?! Nuh uh, no! Lucifah, I get that you're probably right, but I felt something within her! I FELT it! There's no fucken way she could've made me feel fear like that, even with some kinda fancy mindfuckery!"

"Oh thee clotpole, of course thee hath felt feareth!" Lucifer rebuked as he outstretched his arms as if the reason was obvious; "Because that bitch fopped thee! Trickery, deception, illusion! It's what we also doth after all, how can you not recognize it?? Just look at yourself, Mammon, afeard over what? Some feeble mutt's attempts at scaring thee?? Get over yourself, man!"

“But I–!! I… Sh-She—!!”

“Mammon,” Bee calmly intervened in a soft but firm voice after having stayed unusually quiet for most of the meeting, placing her soft hand upon Mammon’s shoulder; “Don’t argue with him on this, please.”

“Nnnngh! Fucken hell, fine…” Mammon at last capitulated. That was then another point sprung up in his mind; “B-But wait, wait! She still burned me, yeah? Surely that’s gotta come at a price for her!”

“Didst I sayeth the lady was going to get away with it scot-free?” Lucifer retorted; “What kind of foolish dolt do thee bethink I am? Nay, she will not be pardoned for this necessarily.” With a great heave, the eternally so-dubbed ‘king of Hades’ lifted his skeletal body up from his chair, clasping his hands behind his back before he began to pace; “Do not fret, O Sineth of Greed, for the lady shall not cometh out of this without, how do we say… a course of precautionary action. Outside interference or not, this hellhound, this… ‘Loona’, the lady hast committed an act of what can beest considered treasonous. As the three of us knoweth, rebellions must be quashed, and furthermore, rebels must be monitored. Yond is wherefore, upon the adjournment of this meeting, I shall send for an efficient man to coax this ladybird ‘Loona’ out of her misdemeanor.”

A big, evil grin spread across Mammon’s face upon hearing this, accompanied by a growingly satisfied chuckle; “**HAHAA, *FUCK YES!!*** That’s the Lucifah I know!! So who will you send, huh? Is he fierce?!”

“Oh aye,” Lucifer nodded, placing his hand gently upon Mammon’s left shoulder in reassurance; “Aye, forsooth this loyal sir is of most wondrous ferocity… but not in the way thee bethink. That gent is greatly *composed, calculated*, but most… ***convincing***.”

Bee writhed in her seat in discomfort, knowing who exactly Lucifer was referring to. She knew that this so fabled man, this ‘man of efficiency and loyalty’, would staunchly sing the devil’s tune.

Eagle's Eye

The day started with a bang; or rather, to be more accurate, with a persistent ache.

"*Aaaaaargh…* Loonieee… Sweetie-pie, please help your old man here, please… *Looooooniiiieee!!*"

Loona flung open her bedroom door to peer outside, her eyes immediately gravitating towards the couch; "ALRIGHT ALREADY, I'M HERE!! Ugh.. I just woke up, holy shit! Now what is it, what do you want, what??" Blitz's pleas for assistance by this point had been continuous for the last ten minutes, the last sixty seconds of which Loona had been awake to hear them.

Though Loona couldn't see Blitz from the angle to which she stood from the bedroom doorway, she could most definitely hear his agonized groans and grunts which were relentless in their repetition. It was a painful sound to have to bear witness to, sounding like an intoxicated bear, a disheveled old man, and a wildebeest with Arthritis all at once, creating a noise which would disturb anyone out of their ignorance of it. Loona's annoyance turned into mild but growing concern when Blitz's weakened hand gripped the back of the couch in an attempt to winch himself upright. Try as he might, in spite of all the shakes, shivers, and weak heaves, the imp's efforts to lift himself up from the couch were completely unproductive. In a pained and pleading voice, Blitz squeaked to Loona; "A-A little help, please?"

"Uhh.. Sure," Loona obliged in an act of definitive mercy, making her way around the front of the couch to find Blitz lying completely flat on his back, his head snugly resting upon the stack of his favorite horse-patterned pillows.

The only thing that moved on Blitz was his eyes, darting towards his daughter to make eye contact with her. He let out a weak, almost forced smile and croaked; "G-Good morning, pumpkin pie. Heheh, rise and fucking shine.. How was your sleep, huh?"

"It was fine, same as always," the hellhound replied as she cocked her head with a raised brow, then asked the more pressing question; "You good there?"

"*N-Nyoo…*" Blitz replied weakly as he attempted to move again, managing to lift his back up before flopping back onto the couch with a pitiful yelp of pain. Any and all stamina and strength that the miniature mess of an imp had left in him was evidently used up on his very first attempt at

heaving himself upright, the absence of core strength rendering him a literal sack of meat and bones.

Another question fled from Loona's mouth, her brow furrowed in confusion at the display before her; "What's wrong with you, what the hell did you do to yourself?"

"Aaaarrgh… Slept funny, I guess?" Blitz guessed to the best of his ability relative to the agony he felt; "I don't fuckin'—*ngarh!* Nnngh, my back, my ass, my everything…"

"What's it feel like?" The young woman now granted the undue and unwelcome title of "nurse" asked as she inspected her patient.

"L-Like I've been pegged for two hours…" A still weak Blitz crudely equated which brought a toothy grin to his face otherwise scrunched with pain; "Heheh… Urgh, *fuuuuck*, c'mon why today..? I've got work to go to, you useless piece-of-shit body! You hear me..?"

"Yeeeah, I don't think calling yourself a "piece of shit" is going to do you any good," Loona critiqued with a disapproving shake of her head, then outstretching her left hand and flexing her fingers; "Grab my hand, I'll help you up."

A deep grimace creased Blitz's already pained face when his eyes met with his daughter's hand, a great deal of hesitation influencing his reluctance to accept. "I-I dunno, sweetie, I don't—*argh!* —don't think I can," the imp dithered as he dared not move a muscle, his voice constricted from the persistent aches; "Literally as… stiff as a board—! But not the good kinda stiff, hehe—*ARGH!!* Nff…"

The hellhound rolled her eyes at her father's filthy remark, then asked; "Okay, so what *DO* you want me to do?"

"Maybe just… I dunno, just— relieve the pain somehow!" Blitz exclaimed, quickly devolving into a state of desperation; "Come on, pumpkin, please! I feel like I'm dying!!"

"Alright alright, calm down!" Loona groaned and cracked her knuckles, preparing to act as Blitz's personal nursemaid for the time being. She had a trick up her sleeve; "You're gonna have to cooperate with me though. I'm gonna need to turn you around, on your stomach."

“O-Okay…” Blitz groaned and shut his eyes, only for them to slide weakly back open when he realized the implication; “But wait, that would require mo—*AAAAGH!!!”* There was seldom an opportunity for objection from the thirty-plus year old as he was quickly spun around to lie stomach-first on the couch, in turn causing a tremendous, diabolical ache shooting right through his spine during the sudden rotation. Blitz bellowed in pain as his right cheek squished into the cushioning; “Christ on a stick, Loona, you’re going to paralyze me!!”

“No I’m not. You’ll be fine, just bear with me for a minute,” Loona reassured in a straightforward manner in a tone that suggested she wanted this whole episode over and done with. She cracked both sets of her knuckles, making sure to loosen every individual finger before asking; “It’s your back that hurts, right?”

“Dammit, it’s my everything that hurts!!” The imp screamed; “*NGAHH*, fuck me! It’s my back!! My stupid motherfucking back!!”

“Noted,” the amateur chiropractor said as she promptly got to work, methodically digging her palms into her quasi-patient’s back and giving it her all. Grunt after excruciating yelp from Blitz, Loona worked hard and thoroughly to rid the agonized imp of his back and joint pain, not wanting to hear about it sometime in the near future. After what seemed like an eternity full of torturous cacophonic squealing, Loona at last finished her round of massage therapy, patting Blitz gently on the back and announcing; “There, we’re done! You can stop yelling now.”

“Oooooouuuuggghhh…” the little exhausted red mess merely replied while barely conscious, his response sounding more akin to a death rattle than a sigh of relief which Loona had half-expected. As recollection served, the only time the hellhound had heard a sound like it was from anyone intoxicated enough just before they emptied their stomach contents, like a warning siren which told her to stand clear.

Loona blinked a couple times, starting to question whether or not she actually had paralyzed the imp lying limp before her. She queried out of the kindness of her heart; “You feel any better?”

“…Yeeeess… T-Thank youuuu…” Blitz weakly expressed his gratitude through a completely exhausted voice, raising one fatigued hand and giving an affirmative but haphazard thumbs up. With a lazy wave of his hand, the imp then pleads through his newfound relief; “*A-Argh!* Hah.. H-Help me sit up, please.”

“Become your nursemaid for the day, have I?” Loona remarked jokingly, but abided by the request through helping her incapacitated dad slowly into a comfortable upright position. A thought crossed her mind, one which regrettably imagined an elderly Blitz and just how much worse and frequent episodes of joint pain like this would be, causing her to take pity upon the seized up thirty-something year old now flat on his behind.

Disorientation and relieved weakness reflected in Blitz’s yellow eyes as he looked to be recuperating himself, Loona watching on in stand-by in case she needed to put her amateur nursing skills to work again. Luckily for both daughter and her father, but especially Loona for the preservation of her dignity, a cautious flex of arms, legs, and most importantly his back proved that Blitz was now more than able to articulate himself without further assistance. He looks up at his daughter through meekly opened eyes and uttered with a self-depreciative grin; “Heh.. It’s like you actually care for me, Loonie-Pie..”

This caused Loona to roll her eyes; “Oh my fucking— of course I do, dumbass. It’s why I stay here,” she affirmed in a softened tone as she sat beside the imp, gently resting the palm of her hand atop his right shoulder; “You sure you’re okay?”

Blitz waved a dismissive hand; “Yeah yeah, I’ll be fine. Just stiff is all… ufff, fuuuuck… Hey, thanks for doing that for me, sweetheart.”

“Don’t mention it,” the hellhound huffed lightly as she remained seated, then staring blankly off into an unspecified spot in the wall behind the television. Loona took a moment to flop gently into the backrest of the couch, giving herself that little bit more time to properly awaken.

Just as a restful silence fell upon the apartment like the feeble delicateness of settled dust, Blitz blew it gently away through the means of a casual, soft-spoken question; “So how was your sleep?”

“It was fine. You already asked me that,” Loona states with a soft smirk, finding light amusement in the repetition instead of annoyance before returning with the same query; “What about yours?”

“Hmph.. No use complaining about it,” Blitz shrugged weakly as if he dismissed any complaints with ease, before he too gazed off into space into the blackness of the silent and still television screen as if it were a inky black starless night sky. An imitation of a starless night sky indeed it was, and one which reflected exactly what was transpiring in the apartment — utter, peaceful, relieving nothing.

A meek shrug came as a response; “Fair enough,” Loona nonchalantly replied as she wearily rubbed her eyes, the last remnants of sleep fleeting away like a brittle saccharine pollen on a nourishing spring wind. The conversation died once more, giving accommodation for stillness to return to the relatively dull but homely environment. At least, that was until noise made itself known once more:

“Hey Loonie.”

“Mm. Yeah, what.”

“You ever just have weird dreams?”

Loona blinks momentarily and pivots her head towards Blitz. This question was odd and completely out of the blue, giving the hellhound reason to ask; “Huh?? What do you mean, what kinda dreams?”

“I mean like.. yanno, the ones which feel like they’re real,” Blitz elaborated; “Like you feel like you’re there, but you’re not. I think they’re called ‘Vivid dreams’ or some fancy shit like that.”

“Uh… I guess so?” Loona considers thoughtfully, her eyes shifting in momentary recollection; “Y-Yeah, I’ve had them from time to time. Mostly after drinking a little too much… They’re scary sometimes.”

“That’s to say the least,” the imp agreed soberly, the look in his eyes suggesting a deeper meaning behind his sudden inquiry.

In her five or so long years of knowing her adoptive father, but mainly in recent months, Loona had learnt all the telltale signs of a troubled mind inflicting his thoughts. Luckily he wasn’t too hard to figure out; whether it be spontaneous drinking and “having fun”, to curling up into a ball while huddled on the couch, these and many more were all of Blitz’s signature signs of brewing concern. With this in mind, Loona went on to ask; “Why, did you have one?”

In a strange and mildly confusing turn, Blitz dare not say anything, seemingly choosing to remain in his daydreaming state while staring off into the blank television screen. There was something truly haunting to Loona about the imp’s eyes, the way they looked like glass doll eyes with just

how unnervingly still they were, as though they were hyper-fixated on some unseen thing within the television screen's inky blackness. Eerily enough, Blitz's current unusual mannerism reminded his daughter of a quote she had heard from somewhere: "If you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you."

This recital sent a chill up Loona's spine, a cause for her to snap her father out of his mysterious trance; "Blitz." She said quietly but firmly.

To the growingly curious hellhound's relief, the imp replied with a mere grunt, though his glassy eyes didn't shift; "Hm?"

"You had one of those dreams, didn't you?" Loona pressed, though she perhaps already knew the answer, and therefore the truth; "You got a weird look on your face."

"…Yeah," was the father's simple reply as he nodded, his eyes shifting for a split second between the black television screen and his daughter, "Yeah, I suppose I did. I-I don't wanna talk about it, kinda fucked me up a little bit. Just one of those things."

In response, Loona nodded sympathetically; "Mhm. I get that." Other than this short-syllabled show of respect for Blitz's right to privacy, there wasn't much else this daughter of his could say; the man wanted to keep the details secret, and that was that. Now of course Loona was going to respect this wish to remain silent on the specifics of aforementioned dream, or rather 'nightmare', but nevertheless the desire to know more was putting pressure on her. Maybe she could squeeze it out of Blitz sometime later in the day? Perhaps. Just perhaps.

"So what was the point of you going up yesterday?" Blitz suddenly had the courage to ask without warning, at long last his eyes steering away from the blank screen and towards the hellhound beside him.

The question was met with a huff as Loona knew that at some point Blitz would stick his nose into her business; it was an inevitability, and part of the package of living with him. Nevertheless, she still loved him, even if she expressed it in her own reclusive and sometimes "distant" way. Knowing that Blitz wouldn't relent until he got an answer, Loona quenched her dearest father's hunger for knowledge; "Nothing really, some dumb invitation to something. It wasn't much, just a talk."

"With who?" Blitz duly pressed.

Loona froze at this follow-up, at once trying to think of a lie to come up with. What was she supposed to do, tell Blitz that she met with a natural sworn enemy? That would cause him to freak out completely. In a rash decision, she blurted out a cover-up story; “With some.. just a bunch of girls who I met up there. Similar interests and all that sorta crap,” the hellhound lied through her teeth.

Blitz slowly nodded his head, his eyes narrowed to a suspect squint; “Riiight… *“just girls”*...”

The sheer sarcasm and suspicion that was latched onto the delivery of the imp’s words, Loona could practically taste its potency like it was some severe odor. With a grunt, the young woman rebuked; “*Ugh*.. Yes, Blitz, just girls that I know. What, do you have a problem with that?”

“Ohhh, nothing…” Blitz said in a snarky kind of tone, sounding almost provocative; “I’m just saying, it’s a little weird that you’re aaaalways going up there as of late. And who do you go see? None other than that Jim-Boy…”

“Let me stop you right there,” Loona argued, knowing then and there that her cover story had fallen before it even had the chance to stand; “What are you implying here? That I’m up there doing who-knows-what with him??”

“You said it, not me,” Blitz remarked with feigned innocence and the most infuriating smirk Loona had ever seen.

Complete and utter speechlessness was the response: “What in the–... y-you think I’m… *Ugh!!* You’re so unbelievable sometimes!” Loona fumed as she jumped up from the couch, stomping over to the kitchen to wash the very last remnants of sleep from her face and eyes; “I can’t even have friends without you thinking I’m making out with them. Like seriously, dad, come on!”

“Aw come on, pumpkin-pie, I’m only messing with you!” Blitz chortled with a massive grin, proving that even his own daughter wasn’t immune from his vigorous goading tendencies.

“Haha. Yeah real funny, asshole,” Loona groaned with heavy sarcasm, little droplets of cold water like petite diamonds scattered across her muzzle and forehead after having washed her sleep crust-ridden face. She returned from the kitchen, making her way back out into the living room proper,

then asking in an annoyed fashion; “You alright to go into work or not? You sure got the energy for it. And the gall…”

“Yeah yeah, I’ll be fine!” Blitz swore as he stretched himself with a light grunt, his joints still facing the aftermath of being stiff as a board. Through a restricted voice as he finished his stretch, the imp uttered passively; “*Nnn–nnngahhh*... Fuck it, what’s on tv?” At once Blitz reached over to the couch’s right hand armrest and grabbed the tv remote, almost dropping it as he spun it around and aimed it at the flat-screen television, then pressed the ‘on’ button. What flashed up on the screen was the news channel blaring suddenly, the female hellhound reporter’s voice buzzing through the speakers which were turned up a little too high. The “breaking news” report of the day, truly, was a sight for Blitz to behold:

“…To Breaking News now, singer and Lust Ring sensation Verosika Mayday has at last left her month-long reclusion and has stepped back into the public light! She was seen last evening leaving the ‘Sloth Ring General Hospital’, before entering into a private car which escorted her back to her private suite in Imp City. Our reporters managed to get a statement to explain her sudden hiatus away from the public eye, this is what she had to say.”

Appearing on the screen was a change in scene, that of which displayed the main entrance of the Sloth Ring hospital from the view of the footpath. Sitting idle just across from the entrance was a long black saloon car, the open rear passenger door guarded by two tall hellhounds, one of them unmistakably being Vortex dressed up in a black suit. As expected for someone of high social stature, a crowd of journalists and photographers loitered outside, a cacophony of noise erupting from them when none other than Verosika Mayday herself, dressed in a fluffy white coat and mirrored glasses, left the hospital through the main entrance. Unlike her other appearances where the succubus looked outright confidence and proud of herself, this time she looked reserved and quiet, almost hesitant to speak with the reporters who were barraging her with indiscernible questions.

“Miss Mayday! Miss Mayday!” The cameraman bellowed the pop-star’s name in desperation, his plan working as Verosika stopped to look at him; ***“Verosika, can you tell us the reason why you hid away at such short notice?”***

“No, sorry. No comment. You don’t need to know anything,” Verosika bluntly replied with a quick ‘shooing’ hand wave as she shuffled hurriedly to her means home.

Unluckily for the woman of fame, however, the reporter was relentless; ***“Miss Mayday, what do you have to say to all of your disappointed fans?”***

This time Verosika didn't give the reporter the privilege of an answer, instead looking straight ahead in silence as she hurriedly disappeared into her private car. Quickly the flurry of cacophonic reporters and camera crews are ushered away from the car, the final part of the reel showing Verosika's jet black saloon car disappearing out of sight. Try as the camera crew might, the meticulously swift driving of the driver and the body-blocking by Vortex rendered any extra glimpses of the vehicle near impossible. And with that, the cutaway reached its end.

Though anticlimactic in the grand scheme of things, the footage of a "humbled" and discomforted Verosika put a toothy grin of schadenfreude across Blitz's lips. Suddenly it felt as though all the pain and agony from earlier was all the more worth it, all thanks to the pitiful display from his nemesis' misery, no matter how grotesque the nature of his satisfaction was in all actuality. This caused Blitz to ugly laugh, yelling the foulest of obscenities at the succubus who was just on screen in a further taunting act of "victory": "HA! That's right, you gigaskank! Beat it back to your whorehouse!!"

In direct contrast to Blitz's reaction was Loona's own, her brow lowered in a sense of concern for the succubus' overall wellbeing. Never in her life would she openly admit it around Blitz, but Loona retained a soft spot for Verosika in the way of being a casual yet admiring fan. More often than not she would check up on the performer's public Sinstagram feed for any updates, especially as of late since the news of her unusual extended solitude. In all honesty with herself, Loona too was curious of the reason for Verosika's sudden hiatus, something telling the hellhound in the pit of her gut that said mysterious reason wasn't good. Maybe, in the fullness of time, the cause would be revealed.

With a small cardboard box with undisclosed contents tucked under her arm, Loona dragged her feet through the doorway and forced herself towards her usual post at the reception desk. While everyone else had arrived for the day, including Blitz who had taken the van in with him, Loona had opted to make her own way to work as a thought had crossed her mind which she promptly enacted upon. This was the reason why she chose to head into work by foot, along with the reason for her detour stowed safely underneath her arm.

"Now look who's arrived a whole approximately sixty minutes late. Again." Moxxie snidely remarked in a sore and inconvenienced tone, with his hands cupping his chin and elbows resting atop the surface. As was protocol whenever Loona was late — which was more often than not, especially as of late — Moxxie was tasked with manning the front desk in case a Sinner came in to place their vengeance-fuelled hits.

"Eat a dick, Moxxie," Loona sighed as she shooed him away from her post, giving him almost no time at all to leave her seat before she sat down. Something inside the receptionist's recently

acquired box shifted with a light wooden *"plink!"* when it was placed beside her, sliding it towards the center so it wouldn't fall off the edge.

Moxxie glanced at the box with feigned interest with one brow raised, pointing a finger right at it as he asked; "What's that in there?"

Loona's eyes darted between the small dull brown package and the imp standing directly across from her; "Nothing. What's it to you?"

"Well I want to know why you're late, don't I?" Moxxie pushed on with his intrusion into Loona's privacy; "What's in the box?"

"It's really none of your business," Loona affirmed with an asserted refusal to reveal the contents. Her eyes scanned the room in a moment of realization, a wry smirk spreading across her maw when the hellhound then remarked; "Hm! Speaking of 'being late', where's Millie, huh?"

"She's out getting something for WORK," Moxxie stated clearly with clear emphasis on the verb 'work'; "You know, being useful? Contributing as a key part of the team??"

Now Moxxie's clearly annoyed snap reaction to Loona's observation proved to her, at least in her own mind, that she had bested him in the art of nitpicking. This victory caused her smirk to grow even wider along with her eyes which held a certain level of "smartarse-ry" within them. With an open palm towards her box, Loona hit Moxxie with a rhetorical question; "Right. So who's to say what I have here doesn't contribute to work?"

"W-Well I… Wh… W-Well you're right, I don't know!" Moxxie said; "But that's because you won't tell me what it is!"

"'Cause you don't have a right to know, nor do you need to. Now scram! Get outta my sight," Loona argued staunchly with a dismissive shoo-ing hand, the gesture of which caused Moxxie to capitulate with ease, albeit with a gruff irritated sigh.

With this first victory of the day, the hellhound now left to her own devices pulled the box in front of herself and tore the sealed lid open. A genuine smile appeared on Loona's face as she was met with the package's contents: it was a small leather-bound sketchbook which came on a set,

complete with two pencils, an ink pen, eraser, and a pencil sharpener with a metal shavings holder. Sketching and art in general had been a large part of Loona's handful of interests for the longest time, as evident by the collection of old drawings she had stored away at home. Art was her most effective means of expressing herself, a healthy alternative for a young woman who couldn't say in truth that expressing her emotions was her strongest attribute. Loona for a couple of years now had grown accustomed to drawing through digital means, but recently as of the past few days, she had been feeling the urge to return to a more traditional outlet of illustration. The purchase of the sketchbook now resting comfortably in the hellhound's hands was the end result of that newfound motivation.

The individual pages rustled softly as Loona flicked the sketchbook open, revealing the first two blank white canvases ready to be used. She looked down at the pitch white page in still thought, her mind blank and indecisive on what to begin sketching in a moment of creative mind fog. And so Loona sat there in silence, tapping the end of her pencil against the wooden surface of the desk as she tried to evoke a prompt in her briefly frozen mind. Before too long, a faint but clear inkling of an idea arose like a light: she should have a crack at anatomy. Loona put pencil to paper and began drawing, gently flicking the tip of the pencil on the page to create curved lines until they formed a small neat circle, then adding two lines crossed over each other — the base of a head. Then came the body, starting with the basis of a neck and torso made out of rough approximate "chicken scratch" lines. This was followed by a series of pencil strokes jutting out at the shoulder and hip points of the torso; these represented the arms and legs, acting as the "skeleton" for the pose the illustrator would depict in her little slice of personal art.

A short while of gliding the pencil later, and behold, now before Loona was a person — or at least, the basic outlines of one. Now comes the question of 'who' — who would this person be? For inspiration, Loona tilted her head up at the ceiling in thought, then averted her eyes back down at the pose she had drawn. It wasn't a particularly flash pose the artistic hellhound had drawn; just a front-facing pose with a slight angle, the 'arms' disappearing behind the torso past the elbows as though the hands were clasped together behind its back. Its posture was staunch and upright with a puffed-out chest, looking as though it was a gallant soldier standing on order from a superior. Now it wasn't as if Loona didn't like her sketch, if anything she was proud of it, rather she was at a loss on how to finish it. "Art Block" is one hell of a thing, affecting anyone who even dared attempt to create.

"Loona!"

Loona jumps in her seat in fright to the sound of her name being called, causing her to shoot her head up with a surprised yelp; "MILLIE! Holy shit, give me a heart attack, will you?!" She had become so infused with her "work" that she didn't notice the short red presence which was Moxxie's wife standing just across.

“Well you’re the one daydreamin’ over here,” Millie pointed out without a hint of remorse for her intrusion; “Whatcha doin’ there, anyway?”

“None of your concern, Millie. Leave me alone please,” Loona pleaded with a feigned smile, trying to shoo the female imp off like her husband.

Millie however didn’t budge; “Well it is my concern ‘cause you’re holdin’ up the meeting!”

“The… meeting?”

“Yes, the meeting! The one we’ve been waitin’ on ya to haul ya ass to for five minutes!”

“What are you ta—…” Loona froze when her eyes hovered towards the desktop screen where the time was displayed, finding that Millie was right; five minutes had passed without her even knowing it. Loona stared blankly at the screen and uttered; “O-Oh. Right. Tell Blitz I’ll be right over, give me five minutes.”

But Millie had other desires, the imp shaking her head with a stern expression. She bluntly refuted Loona’s request, snapping her voice like an angry serpent; “No, you’re comin’ over now! Quit wastin’ our time and join us, we don’t have all day like you.”

“Hmph.. Alright, fine. I’ll come,” Loona capitulated at last, reluctantly picking herself back up from her chair and dragging herself to the meeting room with Millie as her escort. Just as Loona put her hand on the meeting room’s door knob, she froze and turned back towards Millie, her eyes narrowed in an almost critical but genuinely curious look. As if out of the blue, a question had graced the receptionist’s mind, one which had been brewing for a little while now. That’s when Loona asked; “Why do you two have to gang up on me like that?”

Millie blinked at the sudden question; “W-What?”

“You heard me,” Loona repeated as she pinched her brow ridge; “You and Moxxie, you always single me out almost all the time. I’m starting to think it’s some kind of personal thing.”

“Huh??” Millie reacted in sheer perplexion; “It’s not like that at all, why would it be personal?”

“I beg to differ.” Loona squinted with great suspicion, her eyes staring deep into Millie’s own; “You two always do it, without failure.”

“Okay, Loona, listen up,” the wrath ring imp replied in a huff; “Read my lips: It’s nothin’ personal at all. It’s just that… well you’re lazy! I’m sorry but ya just are. You’ve got this bullshit habit of lyin’ around and dozin’ off just like that, while the rest of us bust our asses off to bring food to the table. Come on, girl, ya KNOW what ya do! I don’t need to tell ya this, do I?”

With much certainty in her disagreement, Loona shook her head; “Okay, but the thing is I DO know I’m lazy. You can scold me as many times as you want for that for all I care! But you got this demeaning tone to you, like I’m not an equal to you. Like, okay, for example: I’ve known you for who-knows-how-long now, and this is really the only time you’ve addressed me by my name. Any other time, you refer to me as “our hellhound”, or “the hellhound”, or whatever. Let me set one thing straight with you: I’m not just a hellhound, nor am I “your hellhound”. I’m a person like you, with thoughts, feelings, and personal demons which you couldn’t even begin to imagine. I respect you, Millie, but the thing is I want to be respected too.”

There was a long and discomforting silence between Loona and Millie as they stared blankly at each other. Both of them had their own convictions on the matter, Loona knew this well, and furthermore she knew that a compromise wouldn’t be finalized here and now, if there even was destined to be one. One thing was for certain to Loona; her feelings and the words she had just conveyed to Millie were real and full of meaning. She wanted to be treated as an equal, that was one of her greatest desires, but whether she would ever be bestowed with that ‘want’ was up to her wildest guess.

Loona watched as Millie’s mouth slid open, her chest rising with a deep affirmative breath as if she was about to speak, but the words died pitifully on her lips. The imp’s brow furrowed as she stuttered; “C-Can we talk about this later? At a better time maybe?”

The hellhound slowly nodded her head; “Sure,” she simply replied, ending the conversation at that before at last opening the door to the meeting room. There they were met by Blitz and Moxxie, waiting in impatient silence for the missing two colleagues to join them.

“Took you long enough,” Moxxie remarked in annoyance with crossed arms, the remark very obviously directed at Loona. Loona didn’t respond, holding her tongue in an act of self control.

Blitz clapped his hands together as Loona and Millie took their seats; “Okaaay, morning meeting, fuckos! Let’s get this shit over and done with, shall we?” With plentiful energy to burn, IMP’s founder lept up from his chair and waltzed up to the whiteboard decorated with various horse drawings. Smack-bang in the middle of the whiteboard was a crudely drawn line graph, contained within it were two horizontal lines colored red and blue respectively which waved up and down the further they went along. With his fingertips joined together to form a diamond, Blitz announced; “So it’s been a good couple of weeks! A good coupla weeks, full of clients, money laundering, scamming the moolah out of clueless shitheads — yanno, fun stuff! But we need innovation, the market’s constantly moving!” Blitz exclaimed as he pounded a fist against his open palm; “That money train ain’t stopping, powered by more and more sinners coming down our way wanting us to tear some throats out. So! Where do we all think we go from here?”

Moxxie opted to speak up; “Maybe we could hire more people? That way we can—”

“Moxxie, people cost money,” Blitz slapped down the suggestion; “We want to make seed capital, not throw it away to pay some schmuck to blow it on drugs and hookers. Any other SMARTER suggestions? Anyone?? … How about you, Loonie?”

All eyes gravitated towards Loona who sat in awkward silence, once more being put on the spot; the story of her life. Her eyes flick between Blitz who stood there awaiting a response, and Millie who had called her ‘lazy’. Now was the time to prove the imp wrong. Loona pushed herself upright in her chair and began to think; “Why not just offer other services? Maybe something like… uh… like spying on people.”

“...Go onnn…” Blitz attentively insisted, Loona’s attempt at a contribution having evidently caught his ear, and so too were Millie and Moxxie’s attention.

“People want to know secrets, right? Hell, we all do,” Loona explained like she was selling something; “So let’s do that, have some sort of “eavesdropping” kinda thing going on. Say, two-hundred dollars for two hours of snooping around in the human world, and depending on the risk of the person we’re spying on, we raise the price.”

“Huh. Now that’s strange,” Moxxie interjected with the world’s most smart Alec smirk; “Look who’s actually contributing for once.”

“Hey, wise guy. Blitz asked for me to join in, and I’m doing exactly that,” Loona stated in an almost defensive stance.

“And this is why you don’t ever doubt my daughter, MOXXIE. She’s a very good girl with a lot of brains,” Blitz scolded with the voice of a defensive father as he walked up to Loona and pulled her close, then started caressing her head like, well, none other than a dog. To make matters worse, he began cooing at her like a child; “Now isn’t that right, my widdle Loonie Patootie~?”

“Yep.. Y-You’re so right..” Loona groaned in sheer embarrassment, struggling to keep her composure in this demeaning position with a low growl purring from behind her pursed lips; “Urgh, someone kill me…”

Creeeeak! … Clnk!

The muffled sound of a door opening and closing just outside grabbed the attention of all four members of IMP, each of their heads and eyes turning towards the door which led outside. All was silent until the sound of slow, methodical footfall against the floor eliminated the stillness — ***Clak… Clak… Clak… Clak…*** — after a few seconds, the sound abruptly stops, leaving the four occupants of the meeting room in even more stillness.

That was when Blitz exclaimed; “Goddammit, a client now? In the middle of *MY MEETING?!* Motherfucker… Loona, go see what this schmuck wants.”

“On it,” Loona complied as she got up from her chair and headed towards the door.

“And tell him to wait!!” Blitz called out just as Loona opened the door to leave.

“Okay, you don’t have to fucking scream it!” The hellhound yelled right back as she shut the door behind her. She sighed a little as she turned around, reciting with a groan a short greeting to get the ball rolling; “Hello, welcome to IMP. What do you wa—…”

Just as Loona was halfway done with her feigned “welcome message”, she froze when her eyes met with the new and unexpected arrival. Who, or rather ‘what’ Loona found, standing with its hands clasped behind its back and waiting patiently while facing the hellhound’s usual post, was indeed a sinner — at least, that’s what Loona thought it was. If it indeed was a sinner, it was one whose

outward appearance was ‘interesting’ to say the least, if not ‘captivating’. The apparent sinner was a tall and imposing figure, standing at around Loona’s own height and dressed in a formal manner. It wore a white uniform; a white military tunic, a white peaked visor cap, white trousers, a pair of black leather gloves, and a black sam browne belt with a cross strap going across its chest and over his right shoulder. Most unusual of all was his legs and feet, or rather lack thereof: His trousers were tucked into a pair of black boots, but a pair which vanished below the tibia and fibula, leaving an empty space where an ankle and foot should begin. He looked to be standing in thin air, or as if his feet were invisible.

Truly Loona was at a loss for what to say, more infused with gawking at the stark white-cladded figure’s back with confusion. She need not say anything however, as the figure pivoted his torso and visor-capped head towards her. Loona felt shocked as its face was revealed to her; an inky vantablack surface, like a three-dimensional silhouette with the outline of a square jawed human head. There was no nose, mouth, or hair to be seen, just the solid shadowy outline of a pair of ears and a right eye, outlined in a faint glowing red with a red spot for an iris. In place of its left eye was a simple small white dot lower than it should be, giving its face a misaligned and disfigured look. Needless to say, the hellhound was left speechless, having been unnerved by the sinner’s eccentric and minimalist appearance.

The few seconds which passed felt like an eternity to Loona as she stared at the formally-dressed sinner on standby, waiting for something to happen. Eventually the silence was broken when, in spite of a lack of mouth, the sinner spoke to Loona in a pleasant and cheerful way; “Guten morgen, fraulein.”

Loona blinked, taken aback by the greeting. She in turn replied; “Excuse me?”

“Hm? … Oh! I see you don’t understand my tongue. I apologize,” the figure excused himself, bringing his hands around from behind his back and clasping them together in front of his stomach; “I said good morning! Wonderful old morning, isn’t it? Despite the… eh… unfriendly nature down on the ground floor, ja?”

“Mhm, yep. It sure is,” Loona sarcastically agreed as she tilted her head away from the man in suspicion; “Look. We’re currently in a meeting at the moment, I’m gonna have to ask you to wait.”

The visitor tittered and waves a hand; “Nonono, that is perfectly fine, fraulein—”

“Stop calling me that,” Loona was quick to abruptly order.

“I understand, I understand,” the sinner complied wholeheartedly, then asked; “So how would you like to be addressed, hm?”

“Don’t address me as anything. We’re not here to be friends,” Loona told him bluntly; “So what do you want? I don’t have all day.”

“Oh, nothing much, nothing at all! I only wish to speak to your boss. If there is a meeting as you say, I am more than willing to wait until he is available,” the figure informed as he leant himself against the reception desk and crossed one invisible foot over the other. Then he humbly inquired; “You don’t mind if I smoke a little, do you?”

Loona shook her head and rolled her eyes, gesturing for the sinner to go ahead.

In response to Loona’s permission, the sinner fished a lighter and a rolled cigarette from his breast pocket. “Danke,” he thanked, sliding the cigarette into the inky black space where a mouth should be and igniting a flame on his silver steel lighter. Holding up the flame to the end of the cigarette caused the paper to flare up and smolder, delicate wisps of smoke rising up and obscuring the sinner’s face slightly. As he took a short but steady drag of his rolled tobacco, the presence blew the smoke out and told Loona; “Tobacco, huh? What a wonderful little plant. My own boss never liked smoking. Between you and me, I reckon he was missing out. Probably still is.”

“Who’s that out there, sweetie?!” Blitz’s called out from the depths of the meeting room, the shut door suppressing his voice to a distant muffle.

“Just a sinner!” Loona shouted right back with hesitancy to take her eyes off the visitor; “He says he wants to talk to you about something!”

“Goddammit— FINE! I’m coming!” Blitz yelled before the sound of footsteps approached the door. Suddenly it swings wildly open without warning, careening into the wall it was attached to with a loud “BANG!” and revealing Blitz standing on the other side; “WHAT?!” He screamed on instinct alone.

“Ah! And you must be Herr Blitz?” The silhouette dressed in white asked as he wandered slowly over to the founder of IMP with cigarette in tow.

“Yeah, that’s me, you Colonel Klink-looking shithead! What’s it to… how do you know my name?” That’s when Blitz spotted the initials on the buckle of the black-and-white visitor’s Sam Browne belt buckle: “L.M.” The imp’s demeanor soured further; “Oh fuck… You’re not from the government, are you?! I don’t care which bootlicking asshole they send, I’m not paying my taxes!!”

“HAHA, oh you man of great reaction! Calm down, kameraden, I’m not here for your tax. I’m here to see you! I’ve heard so much about you out there, who hasn’t?” The sinner rhetorically asks with another titter, holding out his free gloved hand for a friendly shake; “You’ve made a name for yourself out there, kameraden, I have heard many good reputable words about your name and your company.”

“Oh…” Blitz raised his brow, before breaking out into a smile and shook the visitor’s hand without thinking much of it; “Well in that case, I’m glad you’ve come! So! What can I do for you? A murder, murder suicide, or double homicide?? Name your poison!”

“Oh no no, nothing like that! After all, my personal enemies, they all died years ago. I only wished to speak to you and your daughter here on a matter,” the visitor informed before going on to say; “By the way, I realized I haven’t told you my name, how unseemly of me! I’m Ritter.”

A grim feeling washed over Loona upon hearing the mention of a ‘matter’ which needed to be talked about, her imagination not stretching far in assuming what said matter was.

‘Ritter’ seemed to notice the hellhound's unsettled reaction, his singular functioning red eye turning towards her and said in assurance; “Fraulein Loona, don’t look so unsettled. I assure you, there’s nothing to be afraid of. I’m only here to set a few things straight.” After saying these words, the staunchly upright specter dressed in white stared at Loona with his one functional eye, blankly focused on her face for longer than what was necessary. This caused Loona to glare right back, baring her teeth ever-so-slightly to assure ‘Ritter’ that she wouldn’t tolerate any smart move he might pull.

Like a switch, Ritter’s demeanor snapped back to that of bright and cheery, clapping his gloved hands together and spinning back towards Blitz; “Wie dem auch sei, bitte! Herr Blitz, please lead us to your office. We shall discuss this matter there.”

“Yeah yeah, don’t get used to ordering me around like that, spunk stain,” Blitz warned and led the so-crowned ‘spunk stain’ into his office, Loona following closely behind as she continued to glare with great suspicion at the man in white. Once Blitz had ushered both daughter and sinner into his office, he called out; “M&M! Look after the desk while I’m in here!” With the barking order delivered, the imp CEO slams his door shut, marking the beginning of talks regarding the matter at hand. One sentiment was shared between father and daughter — they weren’t looking forward to this.

To Loona and Blitz’s further annoyance, ‘Ritter’ persisted in ordering them around in his maintain relatively pleasant demeanor; “Do sit down, kameraden, both on the same side if you can! I prefer that I speak to both of you face to face.” Ritter in turn took the chance to sit down as well, in a seat which surprised both regulars of IMP: he rounded the desk and sat in who else but Blitz’s office chair, making himself very much at home.

“Nuh uh, no way, no fucking way! Get the fuck out of my seat, you prick!” Blitz barked angrily, obviously offended by the sheer gall of the increasingly unwelcome visitor.

“I’m afraid you don’t have a say in where I sit, Herr Blitz,” Ritter told the fuming imp. He snobbishly gestured his hand at the space directly across the desk; “Stand at attention beside your daughter here. We shall talk like this.”

“This bitch…” Blitz whispered angrily to Loona who nodded rigidly in agreement with the insult, the pair of them very reluctantly standing at attention in front of this pompous specimen. A gruff sigh left Blitz’s mouth as he asked; “Spit it out, Oktoberfest, what do you want from us?”

“It’s nothing that I want personally from you, good sir,” Ritter corrected with a certain level of professional indifference, taking a short drag of his cigarette as he crossed his legs; “As a matter of fact, I don’t want anything out of either of you. To be frank, if it was my choice, I wouldn’t be here right now, talking to the both of you. I am here on the order of the collective authorities that control me, that of course being the ‘General Committee of The Nine Realms’. As I have been foretold, I am sure you both are familiar with that government body.”

“Oh yeah, sure we are,” Loona said callously, her eyes narrowed to an aggressive, critical squint; “I’m full aware of the fact that they do sweet fucking NOTHING to improve our lives. We sit here busting our asses off to pay rent and to feed ourselves, and what does Lucifer and the rest of them do? They don't care about us!”

Blitz gasped; "Loonie!"

“That’s besides the point, Fraulein,” Ritter replied brusquely, at this point ignoring Loona’s earlier request to not address her as anything fancy; “I’m here not to punish you, or to make your lives worse, or anything in that regard. Rather I am here to make sure no harm comes your way, Fraulein Loona und Herr Blitz, and I only ask for at least minimal cooperation. Herr Mammon isn’t very happy about the incident which took place the other day, and if he had it his way, you both would’ve had your heads on STAKES right now! Do you realize how serious of a situation this is, mein freunde?"

"You listen to me for one second, Colonel Klink," Blitz demanded as he slammed his hands on the table! He points a stiff finger towards Loona who was in the same disgruntled and uncomfortable mood; "My daughter, that is MY DAUGHTER, is NOT guilty of anything! You get that right in your jackboot-toting, sauerkraut-eating, cock-sucking head of yours!"

Up until this point, Ritter had been cold and composed towards the situation at hand, but this particular convoy of insults strewn his way managed to rattle him a bit. In a low voice which suggested anger, the seated authority said; "Pass in meiner Gegenwart auf deine Zunge auf, du dreckiges rotes Schwein."

"THE FUCK DID YOU SAY TO ME?!" Blitz bellowed and reached into his coat, swiftly pulling out his flintlock pistol and aimed it towards the intruding pest! Loona too raised her aggression tenfold, unsheathing her claws and hunched over and ready to pounce, snarling with her teeth completely unsheathed up to her gums! Something was going to unfold in the IMP headquarters that day, and for certain it was going to end up with a dead body or two!

...

But Ritter didn't react. He sat there, quiet and still, seemingly waiting for both father and daughter to return to their senses. This sent a chill up Loona's spine, though she still maintained her aggressive stance. After a tense one-sided standoff, Ritter spoke in his calm and collected tone; "The pair of you are a pair of dumme Hitzkopfe. That attitude, this... unseemly aggression. It will be the death of the both of you if you continue it, especially towards Herr Mammon. So, in order to prevent such an unnecessary fate from occurring, I am here to make an agreement.”

Blitz squinted hard, hesitantly lowering his flintlock pistol away from Ritter's unnerving face, or lack thereof, which was like staring into a hopeless inky abyss; “Uh huh, yeah sure! What kind of agreement, fuckface?”

With ‘law and order’ still lingering like a potent odor in the office, Ritter heaved himself up from the chair and delivered his ultimatum; “At the beginning of every week until further notice, starting

from Monday which is a mere three days away, I will come and visit either of you on the grounds of making sure that everything is in order.”

Loona snapped, her voice cutting through the air like a piping hot machete blade through feeble flesh; “The fuck does that mean??”

Ritter’s unsettling eye focused sharply on Loona like an eagle’s eye of prey; “That means no collaboration with enemies of the state. I’m of the opinion that you are not in collaboration. Make sure that opinion remains so. I need not say anymore. For now? I depart.” And with that, the imposing authority scooted around the desk and briskly pushed the door leading to the lobby wide open. Before he left completely, Ritter turned to Loona who was glaring at him with much anger and concern in her eyes. He told her, in a low and flat voice; “Nice drawing, by the way.”

"HEY, WAIT!" Loona bellowed out to the departing specter; "We didn't agree to shit!"

"You are now! You have no choice," Ritter informed in a cold and serious tone. And then, like a ghost in the unhallowed depths of an ancient crypt haunted by time and the lingering sins of many, he left.

Pennies, Thoughts

Moxxie watched on with alarm as the specter in white marched right out of Blitz's office and made strides towards the front door to leave. Further confusing the imp was seeing Loona barge out of the office shortly after to glare intensely at the departing tunic-cladded figure, growling with intense anger at him. In this sporadically unfolding situation, Moxxie asked out of compulsion from the front desk; "Loona, what's going on??"

Loona didn't respond, infused with stalking the sinner from afar as he hence departed from 'IMP', without as much as one final look of acknowledgment to the fuming hellhound and her equally hotheaded father. Just as the door closed by itself, and with the culprit of the sudden tension gone, Loona blurted out with much enthusiasm; *"PRICK!!"* She exploded angrily, grabbing a nearby spent beer bottle and vaulting it at the door in a rage, the projectile shattering on impact!

Following after both hellhound and sinner was Blitz, sliding to a stop with his flintlock still gripped firmly in his hand. He snaps his head at Moxxie and points fiercely to the door, ordering; "If you see that asshole ever again, blow a hole through his head!"

"What the hell's going on out here??" Millie interjected suddenly after having seemingly returned from the bathroom.

"That bootlicking, sauerkraut-drinking prick is what's going on!" Blitz bellowed with ferocity, his voice cracking with blazing anger; "He sits in my chair, orders me around, talks shit about *my* daughter?! I'll have his fucking head, MARK MY WORDS!!"

"Not after he gets *YOUR* head first, Blitz!" Loona barked right back, her anger directed now at her father; "Are you crazy?! He's Lucifer's eyes and ears, one move against him and we're all dead!" The hellhound let out a deep and guttural sigh and ran her fingers through her hair, fixing it up from the wild and wiry state it was in. With a growing sense of cautious calm now that the perpetrator was gone, Loona breathly exclaimed; "Fuck… What next? Seriously, what next?? It just keeps getting better and better! I should've never gone to that party."

"Say what now, what party?" Millie once again asked, completely out of the loop of the context, let alone what was happening.

Loona groaned and explained; “Look. Long story short, Mammon ran his mouth, I said something back, he lashed out against me, grabbed me, and somehow he got himself hurt. I don’t know how, or why, but now I’ve got all these eyes on me now! I can see it now: *"Hellhound in prison for daring to speak against local fat-face!”* Why can’t he just let it go, accept that this is his fault, and fuck off??”

“I mean, this is Mammon we’re talking about…” Moxxie gave his two cents through a mutter. Perhaps he was speaking from a little bit of experience regarding the Sin of Greed, after all he did hail from the ring of all things seed capital himself.

“As if *you* know him, Moxxie,” Loona rolled her eyes in response, not in the mood to tolerate anything for the moment.

“Nono wait, but I do!” Moxxie said right back, his demeanor absent of any snideness unlike earlier — his attitude alongside Millie’s from the past month or so still needed to be addressed. The imp explained; “I remember him. Used to see him all the time when I was a kid.”

Though her brow was lowered with leftover rage and her eyes narrowed to an angry squint, Loona gave Moxxie a moment to speak, to express what he had to say. A faint part of her thought that maybe, just maybe, what her coworker had to say about the vengeance and riches-fuelled Sin would be of some use. Of course, Moxxie utilized this opportunity to speak, going on to tell the irritated hellhound; “He used to come over to meet with my dad at the mansion I grew up in. They’d always talk about all sorts of shit behind closed doors; who to pay, who to kill, who to send guns and drugs to — you name it! Yeah, he’s a ‘*huge’* asshole alright.”

“Nooo, really?? Never would have guessed!” Loona remarked with heavy sarcasm, running her fingers through her hair from all the anger and anxiety she felt in that moment. Quickly Loona stifled herself back to silence, trying to think things through as she began to pace like a caged lion; “Nnngh.. holy shit, what am I gonna do?”

“Woah hang on, let’s just calm down a minute there, Loona. Let’s think about this,” Millie suggested; “What exactly did this guy say, what does he want with you?”

“Fuck if I know!” Loona exclaimed; “He said that apparently they think I’m collaborating with *“enemies of the state”*, whatever the hell that’s supposed to mean. Said that because of that, he has to come visit me and Blitz weekly, to make sure we’re not. Again, I don’t know what he means! Like what, what’s an enemy of the state to these dickweeds?”

“Sounds like he’s talking about rebels and people looking to start an uprising,” Moxxie spoke up again with intent to provide help.

“I guessed that much.” The rattled but significantly calmer hellhound sighed, bowing her head towards the floor with her hands resting on her hips. Suddenly she threw her hands up at a loss and said; “But that’s not me! I can’t even get my own life together, let alone start some stupid uprising. Good to know we’ve got a bunch of paranoid delusionists running Hell, that’s just great! Probably explains why everything is so shitty down here.”

“Okay, Loonie. I *really* gotta ask,” Blitz maneuvered himself back into the conversation; “What’s with all these remarks recently? Like yeah I agree with you, society fucks us all in the ass everyday. But you’ve never said stuff like this before.”

“So it’s a crime to state the obvious. Got it,” Loona said in an almost flat and disappointed way.

Blitz was hasty to elaborate his view; “Hey I’m not saying you can’t, if anything I’m proud of you. Fuck the system! Just saying it’s unexpected to hear it come from you.”

“Yeah, well. Opinions change,” Loona stated with confidence in her own alluded-to point of view. Eager to move on from whatever had just unfolded, the hellhound digressed; “Anyway, who cares. Let’s just get this day over and done with, forget that shithead even came in today.”

“Fine by me. *Fucking asswipe…*” Blitz said with a hint of a growl, still seething over the disrespect the sinner had given himself and his daughter. As per Loona’s suggestion, Blitz moved on, but not on his own accord: The sudden sound of a multitude of bird whistles erupts from his phone, catching him completely off guard. In surprise Blitz pulled out his phone and looked at the screen, finding an incoming call from none other than a certain owl prince. A groan rose like a rumble from the full-time assassin’s mouth as he forced himself to answer; “*Christ on a stick, here we go…*” With a tap of the screen, the call is answered with a forced greeting; “Hey Stolas, buddy! Long time no see. Wha-what’s going on? … The say what now? … Oh, the full m— it was *yesterday?!* Shit! I’m so sorry, Stolas, I completely forgot! I-I got caught up in all this— huh? … Tonight. Right, okay. Stolas, we’ll talk about this, just give me a minute.” The imp lowered the phone from his ear and snapped his head towards all three of his employees; “I’ll be right back. Millie! You’re in charge. And Moxxie. Quit your bullshit,” Blitz dictated before quickly vanishing back into his office, slamming the door behind him with a loud slam.

“What did I do?!” Moxxie yelled out with a hint of anger, something which was unaccustomed for the usually mild-mannered husband to act out in. Even Loona picked up on this change in behavior, especially over the past month or two. When no response came to him, Moxxie let out a grunt and jumped up from his seat, marching right off to a spare room and closed the door behind him. And then there were two.

Just as Loona returned to her post at the front desk, she heard a shaky sigh leave Millie’s mouth, causing the hellhound to lift her head up towards her. She found the wrath imp turned away and facing nothingness, her arms wrapped around herself in a reclusive self-embrace. Out of all the odd things she had heard, especially over the dozen weeks which had transpired, Loona hadn’t ever expected to see a telltale sign of weakness from Millie; she was the last person Loona expected to lower her guard. Out of concern, the receptionist called out; “Millie?”

“Ya noticed it too, haven’t you.” Millie said meekly without a second though, though it wasn’t phrased as a question, instead more a statement of the facts as she knew them.

“Noticed what?” Loona asked, genuinely unsure as to what her colleague meant.

Millie let out a gruff and exhausted sigh; “Loona, come on. You know what I mean. Moxxie.”

“Moxxie?” Loona furrowed her brow and shook her head; “Other than he’s acting like a little shit, I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

“No, but that’s what I mean,” Millie attested to Loona as she turned around, still hugging herself in such a way that her fingers dug into her forearms like claws; “That’s exactly what I mean. He’s been actin’ so, so… *strange* recently.”

In a faintly dismissive act, but not disregarding Millie’s feelings, Loona scoffed a little and shrugged; “To be frank, Millie, he’s always been a bit like that. Snobby, abrupt, annoying. Part and parcel of him I’m afraid.”

“Key word *‘a bit’*…” Millie weakly refuted, her eyes showing a sense of deep reservation and concern which in turn confused Loona; “Have ya noticed just how much more he’s been picking on you?”

“Yes. I have.” Loona replied bluntly, her eyes firm and critical and her words said in such a way that they stung like syllabic daggers; “I’ve also noticed how much you’ve been taking jabs at me, too. Like a little tag team, playing “kick the hellhound” or whatever.”

A look of shame washed over Millie’s face as Loona said this, her eyes diverting away from her coworker as if she was ashamed to even look the hellhound’s way. “I know…” Millie confessed in earnest, her voice clear and without hesitation; “I know I have been, and I’m sorry.”

Loona blinked in mild surprise — an apology? From Millie? Cautiously she began to wonder if this was some kind of sick joke, or if the professional blade-wielder was going through some form of severe delirium. In a hesitant but surprised fashion, Loona replies; “Uh… Apology accepted.”

“Thank you. No but seriously, thank you…” Millie expressed her gratitude in a half-whisper, averting her eyes to look at the shut-off room Moxxie had contained himself inside as though to make sure he wasn’t listening in. This outward caution served only to confuse Loona further; what exactly was Millie about to say which warranted this amount of secrecy? The gloomy female imp gazed at the door for a little longer than usual in pure silence, the only sound being that of Blitz’s faint and suppressed voice coming from within his office, the call with Stolas evidently still going with the context unbeknownst to everyone else but commoner and goetia. Before the silence became disconcerting, Millie sighed short and sharply, then spoke up again in a heightened whisper; “He hasn’t been like this long, maybe like since ya went missin’ in the human world. Blitz put work on hold for the entire week to try and find ya, and I think Moxxie got really pissed off at you for that.”

“Fair enough,” Loona nodded her head, then saying; “And I’m sorry for pulling that shit. You know, I wasn’t in the right frame of mind then, and I had a few issues going on. I still do, they haven’t gone away.”

“I forgive you,” Millie replied to Loona’s own faint surprise, then continued; “But he hasn’t let it go, I don’t think.”

“Wait, so, he’s still pissed off at me for that whole thing?” The hellhound went on to ask, seeking an answer to stop whatever charade was going on with Moxxie.

But Millie shook her head; “I dunno. I guess? But he’s been getting snappy at me, too.”

“He is??” Loona asked with disbelief. This really was something unheard of: Moxxie, usually a gentleman who displayed unwavering chivalry towards his wife, and stalwart in his loyalty to her, was getting snappy at his wife.

“He is…” Millie repeated back; “A-And I don’t know why. He won’t tell me anythin’. Moxxie used to be so open and calm with me, but now he just feels distant. I know something’s botherin’ him, I can see it when I’m home with just how quiet he is, but whenever I point it out he insists that he’s fine. But he’s not, Loona, he’s… **snff** …h-he’s not at all.” A single tear of hopelessness rolled down Millie’s cheek as she choked on her last string of words, then balled her right hand into a fist and bit down on her knuckles.

Things had just gotten stranger, and Loona knew this and acted accordingly: “Woah woah, hey, Millie,” she beckoned; “Listen. I’m not one to give advice and I may not like Moxxie, but if his behavior’s bothering you that much I think you should go talk to him about it. Be upfront.”

“I know, I know!” Millie choked out her words, ridding her cheek from the singular rolling tear; “I know… But he’s scaring me. That’s not the Mox’ I know, that isn’t the man I married.”

Loona maintained a sense of respectful quiet; “Hm.” She hummed in acknowledgement, thinking deeply on the words Millie had confessed. As foretold, and was no secret, Moxxie wasn’t the hellhound’s favorite person to say the least, having been at odds with him half of the time at best, and continuously at worst. But if there was one thing which Loona could agree on with regards to the man who barely scraped above four feet in height, it was the fact that he wasn’t one to be snappy against his wife, nor to be a recluse against her. This was severe. A feeling of pity for Millie filled Loona’s otherwise mostly indifferent heart, causing her to say; “Sorry, Millie. Wish I knew what to say to make this all better for you. I’ve never been married so I… I-I guess I don’t entirely know what it feels like. But you’re not alone. Feeling that you can’t connect with someone fucks you up bad, I would know. If whatever’s going on with Moxxie continues, and he doesn’t sort himself out soon, I suppose you can… talk to me about it?”

At first there was no reply, though Millie did freeze and gazed into nothingness and seemed to consider the offer of support. Eventually the distressed imp sniffles a little more, then with a feeble smile squeaked; “I appreciate it. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Loona said in return.

“So what’s goin’ on with you?”

The receptionist asked for elaboration; “What do you mean?”

“Well you said you had some things going on,” Millie recalled; “What are they?”

“*Psh!* Nothing really,” Loona dismissed with a casual wave of the hand; “Just some things I've been tryna figure out, nothing important. No use whining about them, what’s the point.”

Just as the hellhound said this, the spare room’s door swung back open at a much calmer rate, and stepping through the open doorway was Moxxie, letting out a sigh as he rubbed the ridge of his brow. He looked to have just pacified himself, at least that’s what Loona assumed. Despite the sad nature of the conversation around his unusual behavior, Millie put on a small relieved smile and approached Moxxie, who in turn smiled back. The wrath imp kindly asked; “You okay, hon?”

“I’m okay, sweetness,” Moxxie replied in turn; “I’m okay.”

“*Sure you are…*” Loona muttered under her breath. Luckily neither Millie nor Moxxie heard the comment. Just as Loona was about to return to drawing, she noticed her phone, sat beside it and rested on its screen. She noticed, too, something poking ever-so-slightly out of the case; a bit of white paper. This was the address that Father Aleksander, the priest of many years she had conversed with the day before, had given to her on an open invitation. In truth, Loona had almost forgotten about it, but now that she had noticed it again, she began to think about it. She asked herself one simple question — *Did she want to go?*

“*…Mm… Mmmrrrgh… mgh…* ***h-hah****… Hah—H-****HAAAH!!****”*

Beelzebub woke up in a cold and drenching sweat within her bed, her eyes wide and wild as they darted sporadically around her darkened bedroom. She shot herself upright and fearfully searched for some unseen threat, using the covers she was wrapped in as a makeshift yellow fabric shield. But the longer Beelzebub looked around frantically, the more she came to realize that there was no threat at all. She was safe.

"*Huff!! Huff! Huff, huff… huff…*" Each breath the Queen of Gluttony took felt harsh against her throat, the sensation of morning cotton mouth only serving to make it feel more awkward. The third time. This was no less than the third time this week Bee had awoken in this violent way, a growingly frequent phenomenon starting from the day prior to Loona and Mammon's little incident. Each night terror thus far was almost exactly the same: A large endless white space, full of noise like the sound of a thousand low baritones. Upon looking down she found herself to be wearing a long gown of white and a cloak, one which she was all too familiar with. She would try to move to no avail, coming to the awful realization that she was fixated where she stood, held in place by something unseen yet oppressive. As the low rumbling noise of this void continued, she would notice something off in the distance: a figure. A tall figure with a huge wingspan, brandishing in its right hand a sword. Then she would wake up.

With these nightmares afflicting her mind, Bee tried to rationalize the cause for them. She came up with every possible explanation, from eating bad food to the early symptoms of an oncoming sickness. Try as Bee might to explain it, she was so far unsuccessful, finding herself at square one every single time. What was this? Why was she having these visions? The Queen of Gluttony began to hope beyond hope that sometime soon, very soon, she would find an answer in due time. After all, time is all that she had when all is said and done, and to a certain significant extent, it too was her prison. Bee tossed her weary head back into the comfort of her pillow, her eyes fixated up at the high hexagon-decorated ceiling shrouded in darkness. The sound of soft guttural snoring rumbled to her right, coming from Vortex who was still sound asleep, having miraculously not been awoken by his girlfriend's petrified shriek. With a troubled look on her face, Bee gently rolled her head rightwards to look at her boyfriend, a deep yearning for his love and comfort rooting itself within her afflicted mind. But at the same time, the Sin didn't want to wake the hellhound deep in his slumber, as she didn't want to bother him and thus become a hindrance. It would be unfair of her to do so, Bee thought sadly. What was she going to tell him anyway, that some cryptic dream which had elements of an era long since gone was haunting her while she slept? On top of that, this was her burden to bear, and her burden only; she needn't inflict that pain and anguish onto anyone else. *They* would never understand. There was, however, one person who *would* understand.

And so Bee crept silently and slowly out of her bed, cautiously peeling the sheets off herself and gently planting her feet on the floor. She hoisted herself up from the bed which caused the mattress to creak lightly, prompting Bee to check and see if Vortex had woken up from her stirrings. He hadn't. A soft sigh escaped through Bee's lips as she retrieved her phone and crept out of her bedroom, heading towards the door leading out into the hallway and the subsequent living room. The troubled queen cracked the door open just enough for her to squeeze through, doing so in as much silence and caution as she could muster. Then, after one final look at her boyfriend still in the deepest midst of sleep, she closed the door. Walking down the short hallway into the luxurious living room, Bee opened her phone and went straight for her contacts list, finding in no time the exact person she wanted to talk to at this hour. She tapped his name and called him, holding the phone up to her ear as she let out a quiet yawn. The buzz of the internal ringing rumbled in her ear for a few rounds, dampening Bee's hopes of having someone to talk to. Her hopes were quickly replenished and turned into relief when the ringing stopped and gave way to a voice; one which was tired, but responsive; *"Mmmh… H-Hello?"*

“Hey Ozzie. It’s Bee,” Bee announced softly to the fellow Sin, rubbing her eyes as she shuffled silently into the living room.

“B-Bee?” Asmodeus asked groggily, his voice croaky and obviously tired; *“W-Why are you calling so late, what’s going on?”*

“I… I had that dream again…” the Queen of Gluttony announced quietly.

The King of Lust yawned audibly through the receiver then asked at the yawn’s tail-end; *“T-The one with the white space..?”*

“Yeah. Yeah, that one,” Bee confirmed solemnly.

“...Was the figure there again..?”

“He always is.” The quad-armed Sin sat herself down on her couch as she continued; “I-I don’t know why it keeps happening, Oz’. It's scaring me.”

“Mm…” Asmodeus hummed in a low tone, his voice buzzing with a light baritone through the line; *“Do you want me to come over again? I-I can if you want me to.”*

“No no, not tonight,” Bee gently rejected the offer; “‘Tex is sleeping, I don’t wanna wake him up. He doesn’t know about the nightmares.”

“Why not?”

“What am I supposed to say to him, Ozzie? How do I explain this shit to him?” Bee sighed heavily and fell into the backrest of the couch, sinking into the padding and running her free hand through her lava lamp-esque hair; “He’s got enough on his plate, the last thing he needs to hear is that I’m having cryptic night terrors. I got an image to hold up, we all do. Nobody wants to hear that the Queen of Gluttony out of all Sins pisses herself over some… stupid recurring nightmare. ‘Cause that’s all this is, Oz’. It’s just a dumb, funky nightmare, right?”

"Of course it just is, Honey-Bee, it's nothing else," Asmodeus soothed from the other end of the line; *"Hey, I have nightmares too, about Fizzie. Everyone does, there's no shame in it. Sometimes our brains just… go into overdrive, start thinking ridiculous things. But they're not real, Bee. Try not to let them get to you too much."*

A small, pensive chuckle escaped through Bee's brief smile; "Tsh… I wish it was that easy." The smile quickly turned into gritted teeth as though the 'Queen Bee' was in pain. Her eyes became misty as she croaked; "Fuck, I'm scared Ozzie. They can't find out. What if they find out?"

Ozzie remained soothing and optimistic, continuing to console; *"But they won't, Bee. The public won't know. But please, you have to tell your boyfriend what's going on. Don't suffer alone on this, okay? It's not good for you."*

"I try not to…" Bee sighed, stifling the tears which were threatening to fall. All was quiet for a moment as the two long-time associates sat on call, the silent commanding respect as the hour was so incredibly late. This 'respect' was broken when the Sin of Gluttony spoke up; "Ozzie."

"Mm?"

"Do you remember that day? The day we all fell?"

"Uh.. I don't much like thinking about it, but I do, yes," 'Ozzie' confirmed with hesitation towards the brought up topic; *"Why do you ask?"*

"No reason…" Bee lied through her teeth. For whatever reason, the Sin then subconsciously tilted her head up towards the ceiling with a vacant yet pensive look in her eyes. Even she didn't know why she was looking up, as there was nothing for her there, in one way or another. Then she spoke again softly; "No reason at all."

Besides the close encounter with that of Lucifer's *"eyes and ears"*, the rest of that day and the following passed relatively quickly for Loona.

Things ran smoothly and were thankfully mundane; she sat at her usual post continuing to mindlessly draw in her newly acquired sketchbook, filling up one page with a few uncolored ‘doodles’ and the next one with a rough depiction of what she saw in front of her. Once in a while Loona would be interrupted by a sinner who, of course, was there with the intent to put a hit on some unfortunate enough morally bankrupt person who was still alive — in total over the day prior and today, there were only four new contracts. A slow couple of days to be sure, when the average sat at around three to four a day. Loona’s job wasn’t much of a breadwinner to be fair, nor was it that interesting, but it paid for her necessities and then some. As the hellhound ‘worked’ — that is draw, listen in vein to vengeful sinners rant about how much they want their enemies to die, and sort out paperwork in both physical form and on the desktop — she also kept a keen but inconspicuous eye on the situation between Millie and Moxxie. In truth, what Millie had told her intrigued Loona, and as a woman of her word, she kept a close watch on the pair. The hellhound took note of just how much the female imp seemed to act as if nothing was wrong around her husband; in other words, she put on a facade. This put in doubt the possibility of Millie adhering to Loona’s advice to be upfront with her husband. *‘If only she could work up the courage,’* Loona thought to herself.

But that was all in the past, *‘the past’* being yesterday. Today was a new day, a day which had now advanced quickly into the mid-afternoon. Now, after another mundane day of work, Loona sat on a bench in the middle of a local park, waiting for someone to meet with her. That someone was a familiar face; a friend of higher stature who she hadn’t seen for a little while, and where Loona now sat was their agreed meeting place. She sat there in that moment of much yearned-for peace, basking in the cool breeze which occasionally blew through both the hair on her head and the fur which coated her body. Unbothered, calm, and collected was Loona’s mind, and she wouldn’t have it any other way. If only this state of mind could come much more frequently to her.

Then came a voice; “Loona! Hey!”

Instantly Loona’s ears pricked up to the sound of the familiar female voice, turning her head to the right to find an even more familiar face; Octavia. The hellhound’s face brightened into a smile as she waved to the goetia princess; “He-ey!” Loona replied warmly, scooting over to make room for her friend.

“Hey! How’s it going?” Octavia asked kindly as she sat down, obviously keen to hang out with a friend who she connected with to a significant extent.

Loona shrugged with a smile and said; “Eh, I guess I’m fine. Still sane, somehow. What about you?”

“Oh, you know.. Same old, same old,” the goetia chuckled and waved her hand dismissively at anything which might trouble her — she needn’t have that bother her today; “Couldn’t care less about that shit, anyway.”

“That’s good. I’m glad,” Loona said and readjusted her posture on the bench, looking out into the park which in truth was one of the few nicer parts of Imp City. She remarked; “It’s nice out here today. Quiet.”

“Sure is,” Octavia agreed; “Dad used to take me for walks through here when I was a kid.”

“Oh yeah? Nice,” Loona calmly replied, then asked; “Speaking of, how is your dad? After all of that… well, you know what happened.”

“He’s doing good!” Octavia told her unlikely hellhound friend, the news for the goetia a gladdening truth to affirm; “Still a little sore and shaken up from what happened, but he’s managing. He’s been acting a little funny whenever I bring you up, though. Like get this; Literally just before I left, he said that I need to ‘be careful’ around you!”

“The hell does that mean?” The hellhound asked with a squint to her eyes. First she was no longer able to keep the grimoire on hand, and now this? If Loona hadn’t expected anything before, she certainly did now.

“I dunno!” Octavia shrugged, just as lost about the meaning of the warning if not more; “Again, pretty sure he’s still a little shaken up about that whole thing. Maybe it’s got to do with that?”

“Maybe, who knows. Whatever,” Loona commented passively, falling quiet for a moment before a thought appeared in her mind at a sudden whim. This was cause for her to speak up once again, touching on the matter which had emerged in her mind. She saw it as important enough to share; “Oh yeah. Via, can I ask for your opinion on something?”

“Eheh.. I-I’m not really good at answering questions. But I’ll try,” Octavia said with good intent as she looked to the hellhound sitting beside her; “What’s up?”

Though it was her idea to entertain the thought which invited itself into her mind, at first Loona was hesitant to go forward with it. She briefly looked down at the phone resting comfortably in her

hands, then back up at Octavia who curiously awaited the mystery subject. With indecision currently plaguing her mind around the subject matter, Loona said; “I’ll tell you a bit later. Wanna walk with me? Getting sick of sitting down, I wanna pace.”

“Yeah, sure!” Octavia said as she got up in tandem with Loona, walking side by side with the hellhound she had formed a close bond towards.

To give herself some time to compose herself with the main subject matter, Loona digressed as she strolled down the pathway; “So what did actually happen with your dad, with the whole *‘getting sick’* thing?”

“Oh it was insane,” Octavia reflected with a shudder; “It started off as just cold and flu symptoms for a few days, then he got a cough, was bed-ridden, got to the point where we had to get people from Sloth to treat him. They tried some experimental crap on him, then he went apeshit and ran off! Scared the hell out of all of us!”

“Yikes. Bad fucking business,” Loona solemnly acknowledged, thinking back to the mind-controlled Stolas she had the displeasure of facing off in the finale of that horrific week.

“Right?? Like I legit thought I was going to see him *DIE* the way he was going.” As the young goetia reflected on this, her voice petered out towards the end in a sign that mentioning *‘death’* in relation to her father distressed her. Octavia let off a soft sigh and said; “I’m just glad he didn't.”

“That whole ordeal was one giant mess,” Loona stated in her own reflection; “But we got through it in one piece, that’s the main thing.”

“Yeah, true,” Octavia agreed with the sentiment before she fell silent, her hands tucked snugly into the pockets of her jacket. Before too long, she asks; “So you were saying?”

“Hm?”

“You were gonna ask a question, weren’t you?”

"*O-Oh!* Yeah, I-I was," Loona realized, clearing her throat before reluctantly returning to the subject matter she had set aside. She knew it was now or never; "Yeah so, uh, I was given an.. invitation to some place a few days ago, and I'm debating whether or not I should go."

"Cool," Octavia said as she continued strolling casually with Loona; "Where's it at?"

"Well… *argh*. Okay. I'll keep it real with you, Via, because I trust you and all that. It's not in hell. I got invited to a place, you know…" Loona then pointed upwards with an outstretched index finger, poking the air twice to hint at what she meant.

Octavia quickly caught on with what the hellhound was insinuating; "Ohhh! So it's up in the human realm?"

"Yeeeeah," Loona replied awkwardly with a feigned and slightly nervous smile. She proceeds to alter a few details on the spot, making sure she didn't mention where and what exactly it was, and who invited her; "Apparently it's a get-together organized by some people, some kinda youth group. I felt like checking it out, but… I dunno. I'm a little worried that they'll find out what I am."

"I see. Well as long as you got your disguise sorted out, I think you'll be fine," the goetia softly asserted, giving Loona a healthy dose of gentle encouragement.

"Heheh. Yeah I suppose you're right," Loona said with a mildly nervous laugh. Her fingers began to fidget a little as they tapped nervously against both her thighs, her arms almost rigidly straight with disconcertion.

Unfortunately Octavia was quick to notice this, prompting her to ask with a titter and a smile; "You okay there?"

"Huh? Yeah yeah, I'm fine!" Loona exclaimed with a forced toothy grin, trying to play off her odd skittish behavior. Trying to divert away from suspicion as quickly as possible, the hellhound asked further; "S-So do you think I should go to this thing?"

"I mean, if you want to," Octavia shrugged, then without question tried to ease Loona's nerves with humor; "Guess just do as my dad said: *'Be careful'*."

“*Haha!* Yeah, I’ll be careful. You know me,” Loona laughed lightly with a smile, this one of genuine nature. She then gave Octavia a friendly nudge on the shoulder, the goetia returning the favor with one of her own.

Luckily for Loona’s otherwise on-edge nerves about the foretold gathering, chatter between her and Octavia moved onto other more lighthearted subjects; that of hobbies, things that they have both been up to, and what they were going to do together for the remainder of the afternoon. In all honesty with herself, Loona cherished these laid-back moments in her otherwise tumultuous life, acting as therapeutic relief for the trials and tribulations which she had been through, like ice to a weeping burn. Furthermore, the looming question of whether she should accept the invitation had finally been answered for Loona, all in due thanks to the input of her much appreciated feathered friend.

Indeed, the hellhound’s mind had been made up, for better or for worse.

Invite Honored

A plain black ‘v neck’ long sleeve shirt, a red tartan skirt worn with a belt, black thigh high socks, and the black-and-white sneakers which came with her human form; this was the outfit Loona had chosen to wear out to the gathering she had been invited to. Sure, it wasn’t an outstanding example of the concept of ‘modesty’ — an aspect which Loona felt she would be pulled up on to her frustration, priest or otherwise — but it was all that she had which was not only clean, but also at the very least presentable. They wanted modesty? They were going to get it on her terms, and as far as she was concerned, what she was wearing was modest enough. If someone doesn’t like it, then tough, that’s on them. In saying this, a part of Loona wanted to legitimately make sure that she ‘fit in’ tonight, having flashbacks to that first party at ‘Bee’s’ and being branded as a “lunatic”. God, the very *thought* of those girls was enough to make her blood simmer, the urge to strangle the ‘main’ leader of the little group beyond tempting. But that was in the past, what happened, happened. Loona was in the present and the near future was entirely in her hands, and as far as she was concerned, she was going to make tonight a good night; one which was worthwhile and hopefully interesting, free of any incidents. At least, so she hoped.

With the afternoon turning into evening, and the sky growing ever dimmer with a vibrant orange and pink sunset, Loona quickly shut the portal behind her and spun around, finding herself in the midst of an alleyway. After making sure the coast was clear, the disguised hellhound carefully folded the sheet of paper and slipped it into the small handbag she had with her; this otherwise unsuspecting bit of paper was Loona’s means of getting home. In frustration of being barred by Stolas from handling the grimoire on her own, the reason which she was still unaware of, Loona had decided to take matters into her own hands and took a risk. Word for word, hieroglyph to hieroglyph, the hellhound sneakily copied the grimoire’s portal summoning spell on a spare slip of paper she had lying around — a blatant forgery. This of course was a massive offense on Loona’s part if she had been caught, but frankly she didn’t care; her independence took priority, bans be damned.

But that wasn’t all. Prior to leaving, Loona indeed told Blitz of a ‘party’ she was going to attend just before she left. However, there was a catch; she told him with a little dose of chicanery, so as to avoid suspicion, that she was just going to one in downtown Imp City, and that she would be back before or around midnight. See, Loona was always good at lying, having done so to her advantage multiple times before to numerous people. Those times however, unlike tonight, were mildly conniving and sneaky in nature. One instance which Loona could recall was the time she pickpocketed a pack of cigarettes at the orphanage, when the old woman who ran the place walked right past Loona’s cell a little too close. And thus, for a whole month, the cold, scared, and reclusive young girl had a source of much needed relief, although said relief wasn’t one of the healthiest of choices. But again, that was all very thankfully in the past. Today was today, and the future was in Loona’s hands, and Loona’s hands only — she felt great comfort and strength in that fact.

And so the undercover hellhound left the dingy yet surprisingly tidy alleyway, walking right out onto the footpath where she found herself in the midst of a row of stores. Instantly Loona recognized the place as the exact way towards the church, the main road slightly less busy from when she saw it last. Using her remarkable sense of direction, Loona made strides down the sidewalk with her eyes glancing down at the time on her phone: **“5:51PM”**, the screen projected in local time. She was nine minutes early, just enough time for her to arrive and get herself comfortable with the grounds once again. Loona didn’t know which was the harder part; trying to fit in at a place which to be frank she had no business being in, or covering her tracks on the way back, lest she get caught by Lucifer’s personal “eyes and ears.” Just the very thought of that sinner alone made Loona shudder, his presence having made a deep impact on her.

Those thoughts of worry and anxiety quickly vanished when Loona noticed a telltale landmark up ahead; the perimeter stone wall which surrounded the church grounds. She recognized this barrier almost instantly, along with the huge old oak tree which was hard to miss, and the tall bronze statue which stood dwarfed underneath its silhouette. Loona sighed and muttered under her breath a short and preparatory; *"Here we go..."* before quickening her pace from a casual walk to a brisk stride, figuring that she should get this ‘over and done with’. There was an abrupt pickup of enthusiasm in Loona’s step as she crossed the road running alongside the stone wall’s perimeter, and the closer the young woman got to the grounds itself the more she was able to see, like the church grounds’ simple car park which was now packed with cars. Most prominent of all before Loona’s eyes was, lo and behold, the church itself; a stark white Goliath with domes of gold, its silhouette almost gleaming against the contrast of the dimming pink and purple sky. A true monument to thousands upon thousands of years worth of teachings, doctrines, and history. Not only that, it too was a testimony to the architectural genius which humanity can muster, a result of centuries of craftsmanship and dedication to the unappreciated art of construction.

For others, beautiful. For Loona, terrifying. But she continued towards it, whether that be out of genuine curiosity or, as Loona herself put it in silent self-critique; *“pure stupidity”*. Before she knew it, the disguised hellhound walked straight through the main gate and thus crossed into the depths of the hallowed grounds, instinctive alarm bells ringing in her mind as soon as she entered. But Loona fought against these subconscious, almost visceral urges to flee, acting purely on her own accord in a feat against a temptation which can control even the most hardiest of people — fear. Physical fear. The visitor’s pace slowed as her shoes made contact with the lush trimmed grasses under the large oak tree’s shadow, looking around to see if anyone was present, the multitude of cars and the wide open entrance gate being a dead giveaway that there was. But there was nobody to be seen. She checked her phone: **“5:59PM”**, it now read; she was on time. Loona became confused and started looking around more, scanning her surroundings carefully before finally noticing it — the doors within the church’s portico were open. Suddenly it dawned on the visitor; they’ve all got to be in there, doing whatever church-goers do and whatnot. Of course they were, why didn’t she think of that? Loona let out a short sigh and decided to go sit down, wandering over to the bronze statue and looking up at its bearded face. Again the feeling of familiarity dawned on the young woman in the same way it did only two days ago, but she still couldn’t figure out where she had seen his face before. With inspecting eyes, Loona looked down at the words on the four-foot plaque: **“в память Николая II — 1868 – 1918”**. She still couldn’t read it.

With a bit of a wait ahead of her for the “party” to start, Loona sat down in the grass and planted her back against the granite plinth of the statue, making sure that her tartan dress and socks didn’t become too scuffed on the way down. Her feet in her shoes felt a little more sore than they had any business being, most likely due to the weakness she felt in both them and her knees induced by her stressing out, so the sit-down was needed. And so began the waiting game, a ‘game’ which Loona hoped she didn’t have to play for long. At least the cool breeze felt nice against her skin, she thought with a dose of positivity as she closed her eyes, deciding that it would be best for her to ‘zone out’ until something happened. Then came movement, or at least the faintest sound of it. Loona peered through squinted eyes back towards the church, finding a group of people exiting at a steadily growing rate. Five people turned into eight, then to ten, fifteen, until it grew to a group of at least thirty if not more. None of them seemed to notice the lone woman resting against the statue in the dark, and if they did they didn’t make it obvious, bar from one or two children with their parents who noticed Loona with very brief glances. The crowds began to split off into two distinct groups; those who were heading towards the car park a few short paces away either by themselves or with family and friends, and those who Loona could tell were of a more young adult age heading towards the Event Hall.

The sight of movement to the hall was Loona’s cue to pick herself back up and join them, doing so with newfound motivation. She took a deep breath as she walked, weaving in between a few people whose eyes briefly locked onto her indifferently before moving right along. Loona paid those eyes no mind as she shuffled towards the group, though she held herself back from joining them completely out of shyness; these were complete strangers after all. Adding to Loona’s insecurity was how the group were dressed — while no, they weren’t dressed on par with aristocrats, their outfits which consisted of belts, skirts, dress trousers, jeans, and dress shirts “shamed” the undercover hellhound with their simple yet formal nature. Just looking at them made Loona feel as if she didn’t belong even more, and she hated that. The urge to turn around and leave was beginning to emerge, only to be abruptly snuffed out when Loona turned around and noticed a familiar face. The ‘familiar face’ was Father Aleksander, who gave the visitor a kind nod as he headed to the front of the now stagnant gathering, flanked by three other clergymen who too were dressed in black cassocks and those funny black hats.

Once in front of the entire crowd which had quickly fallen silent, the bearded man addressed them all; “Privet, dobryy vecher!” He went on to address everyone present warmly in his native tongue, and although Loona couldn’t understand much of what he was saying, she knew that it was definitely some generic “thank you for coming” monologue. With these words spoken after what had to be half a minute, Father Aleksander turned around and walked with his fellow clergymen in tow to the main entrance. The noise and chatter from the crowd picked up again, this time only half as loud than before as they began shuffling towards the entrance, all of them enthused with each other’s company having barely noticed the novel face behind them. Now Loona of course had no obligation to stay, she could leave at any time she wanted, even now when she had the chance — yet something told her to stay, that for whatever reason there was no turning back now. How could she? And so, with a stiff upper lip, Loona followed the crowd.

The crowd passed through the front doors of the Event Hall one after another, with Loona of course being the last to enter, trailing far behind from the rest. She invited herself in as she hugged her

forearms timidly, peering into the hall to find a scene of relative simplicity. It was nothing too special, rather humble in nature; a few tables lining either side of the hall packed with food and drink, about a dozen or so tables and chairs set up around the center with half of them already populated by people, and the vacant built-in stage solely occupied by a singular microphone on a stand. The thirty or so people who had gathered inside had more than enough room to move about, each of them chattering away and socializing with ease. Sadly the same couldn't be said for Loona, who stood aloofly in the doorway and felt awkward with herself. Like a lost child she crept deeper into the hall, skirting shyly around the room's sides to avoid contact — not that she didn't want to talk, rather she was concerned as to how these people would react to some new unexpected face. "What am I doing here anyway," Loona began to think to herself; "I'm not even Russian!" She was halfway across the side of the room as a few people finally began to take notice of the reclusive, strange woman, glancing at her out of curiosity. But this only made Loona's anxiety worse, who by this point was no longer sure where she was going or what she was doing, implying that she knew in the first place.

Then, disaster.

Bump!

"GAH!!" Loona collided with another person by the food tables, tripping over her own feet before falling hard to the floor! The loud ***"THUMP!!"*** of the disguised hellhound slamming into the timber floor grabbed everyone's attention, all eyes now fixated on the wholly embarrassed new arrival who noticed everyone's gazes. Loona's ears began ringing with tension as she tried to stagger back up on her feet; "Sorry! I'm sorry! *Argh,* I'm an idiot, I'm so sorry!" She profusely apologized while still on the floor. Loona's eyes focused on the person who she had just collided with, finding that who she had run into was a young woman in a bright blue shirt and a long black skirt.

The stranger looked down at Loona and said in a thick accent; "No no, it's okay! You're fine, I promise!"

"No, I'm not fine!" Loona refuted, full of self-humiliation; "I'm an idiot! I bumped into you, I'm sorry."

"Oh my God, you're fine!" The young woman rolled her eyes before outstretching her hand; "Come on, I'll help you up."

At first Loona hesitated and stared at the outstretched hand, but eventually she grabbed it and was pulled up from her humiliating position. After dusting off and fixing herself up from the mess she had caused, Loona looked to the girl standing before her and squeaked; “T-Thanks. Again, I’m so sorry about that, honest mistake!”

“Stop worrying! I already said you’re all good,” the young lady replied with reassurance, before pointing out; “Can’t say I’ve seen you around before. Are you new here?”

“E-Eheh.. More than you know,” Loona remarked with a forced grin, still feeling awkward about both herself and the accident. Then she let slip; “Is that a bad thing?”

“*Huh??* No, of course it’s not!” The girl exclaimed, her brown shoulder-length bob haircut swaying as she shook her head; “Always good to see a new face. Between you and me, it gets a little boring after seeing the same faces over and over. It can drive me a little bit mad! So how’d you find out about this, what made you come?”

“Oh, you know. I just thought I’d come check it all out, see what the fuss was about,” Loona told the girl; “That ‘Father Alexander’ said that I should come. So yeah, here I am! In the flesh, acting all weird. Hahah, *yeah*..”

In spite of Loona’s outward awkwardness, the fellow young woman worked to soothe the newcomer’s nerves; “That’s fine, we all act a little weird sometimes! It’s good to meet you though.” The Russian girl shot out her hand for a shake; “I’m Svetlana.”

“Okay, um… I’m Loona,” the disguised hellhound told ‘Svetlana’ in return, who after acting hesitantly, timidly shook the Russian girl’s hand.

Svetlana took interest in Loona’s name; “Huh. Wait, *‘Luna’* as in space and all that?”

“Y-Yeah, I guess?” Loona shrugged; “More like ‘Loona’ as in the moon, but it’s spelled with two o’s.”

“Spelt with two o’s…” Svetlana repeated, sounding as though the spelling of Loona’s name intrigued her to a considerable degree. Her eyes squinted off into space as she processed this information, before focusing back on Loona and said; “I like it.”

Loona blinked in surprise, a smile appearing on her face like sunshine through clouds; “Oh, uh, thanks. I’m gonna be honest, I really don’t get that a lot.” Slowly but surely, and with no small thanks to Svetlana’s open friendliness and hospitality, Loona was beginning to grow comfortable and quickly accustomed to her surroundings. An embarrassing stumble had by some miracle turned into a positive turning point in the undercover hellhound’s experience at this ‘party’, if you could even call it that. No, it wasn’t exactly Loona’s idea of a ‘party’, but at least it was relaxed and laid back unlike some others she had attended in the past.

Now Svetlana was just about to speak before she cut herself off, squinting her eyes in thought before she finally asked; “Hang on a minute. Was that you who I saw sitting underneath Nikolay?”

“Nikolay?” Loona asked, before it quickly dawned on her; “Ohh wait, you mean the statue? Yeah that was me. How did you notice me, I was hidden in the dark there a bit.”

“Please, Loona, you stick out like a sore thumb! No offense by the way, just an expression,” Svetlana stated, the fellow young woman quick to assure no hard feelings.

“None taken. I know I do,” Loona assured right back; “Probably the reason why I’m being so skittish if I’m gonna be frank.”

“Don’t worry, I get it! It’s a new experience, you didn’t know what was going to happen.” These words of comfort, these expressions of understanding. It was more than enough to soothe Loona, so much so that she no longer felt the urge to leave, or at least it had been suppressed to such an extent that its ugly influence had been quashed. In the brief moment they both fell silent in tandem, Svetlana and Loona took in the soft and therapeutic sounds of the relaxed, no-nonsense gathering. Though they didn’t say anything to each other, the both of them agreed in mutual stillness that this was the place to ‘get away from it all’, so to speak — or at least that was Loona’s take on the party. Suddenly Svetlana interrupted the stillness between them, catching the newcomer’s attention by asking; “Want to come sit down?”

“Oh, nono, I’m fine! I’m alright to stand around,” Loona refused the offer quickly, throwing her hands up.

Svetlana was having none of it; “Nonsense Loona, you have to come sit down, you must!”

For as much as Loona tried to reject the invite, the Slavic woman's influence on her was too great to resist, finding herself being ushered by Svetlana like she was under some mind-controlling spell. Loona weaved past people and tables, brief glances being sent her direction as she walked past, the disguised hellhound's approach to them still awkward and aloof. It didn't take long for her to be escorted to one particular table on the other side of the hall, one which was round and hosted six chairs, only three of them occupied by two men and a woman respectively. The seated girl looked similar in appearance to Svetlana, the difference being that she wore a white knitted sweater and a beret over her long blonde hair. Both seated to her left around the table were the two young men; the thin one to the girl's immediate left was dressed in a gray checkered short sleeved shirt and sported a watch, a full head of wavy hair on his head and a "caterpillar" for a brownish-blonde mustache filled in his thin-structured face. To his left was a stockier man, dressed in a black blazer and white undershirt with the head shape of a broad oval, his face clean-shaven and complemented with a uniform crew cut, not a single hair on his head left astray. A harder-than-stone look resonated in the way he held his eyes, making Loona become slightly apprehensive of him in particular.

At first they didn't notice the pair approaching them, that was until Svetlana called out to the trio, their heads turned to the sound of her shrill voice. Before she even knew it, Loona had sat herself down with the now reunited group of four, remaining tight-lipped to let Svetlana do the talking while the stranger focused on getting used to the new faces. The hellhound out of her element watched on as light and casual conversation broke out between Svetlana and her group of friends, their native tongue intriguing the new arrival to an extent she hadn't expected to feel. At first the group didn't pay any mind to the still and quiet Loona, but that ignorance ended when the mustached male locked his eyes onto her. He casually pointed a finger towards the stranger and asked the disguised hellhound; "I kto ty takoy?"

Loona blinked and shifted in her seat; "I'm sorry?"

Svetlana butted in, saying to the young man; "Psst! Hey, Isaak. Ona ne govorit po-russki."

A look of realization appeared in 'Isaak's' gray eyes as he mouthed off a quiet "oh" before he focused back on Loona, asking her in English this time; "So you don't know Russian, no?"

"Not much of it," Loona wasn't too ashamed to admit, rubbing her shoulder in a slightly nervous fidget.

Alas with Loona's failure to keep the state of her nerves hidden, it was small wonder that this 'Isaak' pointed it out, saying to her; "You know there's no reason to be afraid here, you're safe with us."

A sharp exacerbated sigh came from Loona in response; “Huff! I know, I know. Just trying to get used to all this, that’s all.”

“So where are you from?” The girl wearing the beret asked, pulling her seat forward and pulling her posture upright.

“Definitely not from around here, that’s for sure,” Loona told her half-jokingly, a half-smirk appearing on her lips for a split second. She had no intention to elaborate. Moving right along, Loona then asked as her eyes wandered around the room; “So… what happens here? Do we just sit around, or…?”

“Pretty much,” Svetlana said; “Sit around, talk, eat, figure out what we’re going to do once this is done. You know, socializing. It’s not exactly the wildest party, but it’s nice.”

“Yeah, there’s that,” Loona agreed with the sentiment, once again looking around the room. The more she looked and heard, the more she agreed with Svetlana’s assessment; it all was ‘nice’. Tranquil, peaceful, soothing, absent from any and all needless commotion and trouble. She may be exaggerating, but Loona thought that she had seen or experienced nothing like it. Of course, she had been to parties, ones that were even identical to this one; but none of them had that underlying ‘aura’ which she couldn’t quite put her finger on. It far less bothered Loona, but rather it more so interested her, like she had just discovered some unknown thing. But what had she discovered? Then another thought struck her mind, a thought very unique in its point of view; was something missing?

Loona didn’t have time to entertain these thoughts, her attention being drawn to a particular set of eyes across from her. There, staring right into her soul, was the stone-faced man with the crew cut. Noticing his gaze, Loona with her “take no shit” attitude glared right back, then demanded; “What’s your problem?”

The girl in the beret, who had thus far remained silent, spoke up; “Don’t mind Roman, he stares a bit. But he’s friendly, trust me.”

“Said no one ever…” Loona muttered under her breath, growing increasingly weary of ‘Roman’s’ gaze by the second. It came to a head when she snapped her head directly towards the culprit, telling him sternly; “Can you stop that?”

Roman, despite Loona's clear protest, didn't budge; it was like he was trying to provoke her. Stepping in to stop an arising incident, 'Isaak' with a slight grin and a chuckle nudged 'Roman's' arm and said; "Roman, prekrati eto. Ty prichinyayesh' bednoy devushke diskomfort."

Finally Roman's one-way staring contest was broken, a wry grin appearing on his gruff-looking face as he let out an equally gruff snicker, turning to Isaak and saying; "Ya s ney tol'ko shuchu."

"Ty debil," Isaak said with a wheezing chuckle, turning back to Loona to assure her; "*Hahah*— Please forgive Roman! He's a huge idiot, but he doesn't mean harm!"

"Whatever," Loona replied with a wave of her hand, stabbing a scornful look at the provocatively grinning Roman before completely ignoring his presence with an eye roll. "So yeah, anyway," Loona said, moving on; "What were you guys talking about before I, you know, *'tripped'* into your lives?"

"Oh nothing, just whatever came to mind," Svetlana informed as she looked back towards the entrance over Loona's shoulder as if she was looking for someone. After pausing for a second to look at the doorway, the young woman continued; "Ahem, anyway so.. yeah, we're just talking, that's all! Mila said she wanted to go to the cemetery to hang out later."

"The massive one up the road from here, right?" Loona asked curiously, the memory of passing that huge general cemetery a few days prior flashed behind her eyes.

"Yeah-yeah, that one!" The beret-sporting girl asserted who the hellhound now assumed to be this 'Mila' Svetlana spoke of.

"Cool," Loona replied; "Hey, your name reminds me of someone I know."

"Does it?" Mila asked, a flicker of curiosity sounding off in her voice.

"Yeah it does! Her name's 'Millie'," Loona went on to educate, finding that her "social batteries" had been replenished. She began talking freely; "She's kinda this "cowgirl" type, all rough, extroverted, kinda scary… annoying. But eh, she's alright, I don't really mind her. Her husband on the other hand, eugh. He's a little shit, quite literally."

“What’s wrong with him?” Isaak interjected.

Loona scoffed; “What isn’t wrong with him? He’s an asshole and then some, let’s just say that. He’s always there to give me a hard time, especially as of late. I don’t know what point he’s trying to prove.”

This time Roman spoke up, his voice low and guttural like his earlier laughter as he let off a slow, smooth shrug; “Big deal. People are going to be shitty in life, no secret in that.”

“Yeah but he’s mega-shitty! I don’t get it, like, what have I done to him?” Just as Loona finished, she again noticed Svetlana looking right over her shoulder, eyes seemingly locked onto the gaping exit leading outside. The disguised hellhound turned to glance at the entryway, only to find nothing obvious which might catch her attention. Loona turned back around to face Svetlana, curiosity in her eyes as she asked; “You okay there?”

Svetlana seemed to jump at Loona’s question, whipping her head back towards the newest member of the friend group and stammered; “Y-Yeah I’m fine! Just looking for someone. Where is he…?”

“Where’s who?” Loona pressed a little, at the same time being mindful to respect the troubled girl’s personal space.

But Svetlana didn’t respond, a poker face appearing on her like a cloak covering her cheerful expression. But her eyes; her eyes appeared as though they were an entire world away. Often it is said that the eyes are a window into someone’s soul or inner selves, a theory which Loona was very familiar with. Just by looking into Svetlana’s eyes alone was enough to convince her that something — no, not just something. Something ‘big’ was wrong. Right as Loona came to this perplexing conclusion, she saw a presence coming towards the table from the corner of her eye, turning around to see who else but Father Aleksander shuffling towards her. He stopped half a foot short from the table and humbly interrupted in cyrillic; “Kak my vse?”

“U nas vse khorosho, Otets, spasibo,” Mila replied, her focus shifting between Svetlana and the elder standing before the group.

“Khorosho, khorosho,” Father Aleksander said softly, clearing his throat a little as he gestured to Loona just beside him; “Ty ne budesh’ vozrazhat’, yesli ya zaberu Loona nenedolgo, nyet?”

“Nyet, konechno nyet, Otets!” Mila replied once again, the rest of the group nodding along in confirmation of their consensus.

“Spasibo,” the elderly priest softly said, then turning to Loona and saying to her in English; “Would you mind coming with me for a minute, Loona? I must speak to you.”

“Ugh fine. Oh! I-I mean, sure,” Loona complied cautiously, but not without a slip up in etiquette before getting up from her seat with handbag slung over shoulder. She took one last courteous look at Svetlana for good measure before being led away from the table. As she was escorted, Loona felt inclined to ask; “Is everything okay?”

“Yes of course it is!” Father Aleksander gave steady assurance, his hands clasped together underneath the sleeves of his cassock; “I just wished to speak to you, see how you are finding your time here.”

A small but prominent weight was lifted off Loona’s shoulders as the elder told her this. She nodded with a growing smile, letting out a soft “fair enough” before saying; “You know what? It’s been good. Was just talking to those people over there, they’re nice enough. So yeah, can’t say I’m not enjoying it.” There was no obvious reaction to Loona's verdict from Father Aleksander, but just by looking at the soft, humbled look in his eyes, the disguised hellhound knew that he was just as happy to hear it as she was to say it, if not more. “So how often does this happen?”

“Not often, just for every fortnight for the next two months. We have other events you can attend if you wish to.”

“Alright, cool. Noted.”

Alongside the Priest Loona continued to saunter, following him to the far end of the hall by the doorway leading to the offices. There they talked further in relative privacy, with Loona taking note of other clergymen she had seen earlier now just off a ways in the far corner, directly opposite of where she now stood. One particular set of eyes were picking shy yet analytical glances at her; the taller member of the group with a slim but broad-shouldered build. He had a thick but shorter brown beard coating his mouth and jaw, thin yet sharp eyebrows fixated into two distinct lines above his eyes, and his otherwise long hair tied back into a bun behind his head.

Now Loona couldn't say for sure that he was looking at her, but she was pretty damn sure of it. This prompted her to grab Father Aleksander's attention, half-whispering to him while staring back; "Who's that, why's he looking at me?"

"Who?" Father Aleksander looked in the general direction where Loona was looking, then realized; "Oh! The one with the brown beard, yes? That's Father Andrei."

"Yeah, him…" Loona muttered, her eyes almost fixated on the culprit. She pointed to him weakly, steering her eyes back to the elder and asked; "What's his problem?"

"No no, nothing at all," Father Aleksander assured; "I spoke to him about you, the hour after you came to see me. Father Andrei likes to analyze people, not out of malice however. He's merely curious about your intentions."

"*Riiight..*" Once more Loona peered at 'Father Andrei', finding that he had gone back to conversing with his fellow men of holy stature. She would watch out for him, Loona thought to herself, just in case. Suddenly a thought came to her, a cause for her to turn her head back to where she was sitting, finding the back of Svetlana's head who was still seated at the table. "Hey, can I tell you something?" Loona asked.

"You may," Father Aleksander obliged.

Loona gestured passively towards the table she was sitting, still looking in that direction as she said; "You know that 'Svetlana' girl over there, right?"

"Svetlana Bordatsky, yes I know of her."

"She was looking over my shoulder a couple times, seeing if some guy had arrived yet. She looked a bit worried to me, but maybe I'm just being delusional — who knows. I dunno, like.. just thought I should tell you, just in case."

"I understand…"

Soon as Father Aleksander said this in an odd dampened and sober tone, Loona looked back at him. She saw his face; though it hadn't changed much in expression, the hellhound could tell that he knew something relating to Svetlana, a faint undertone of regret and sorrow reflecting in his eyes. Taking initiative, Loona pressed; "Is she okay?"

"I-It's a matter that I shouldn't speak on. A private thing, if you will," Father Aleksander solemnly replied, the question evidently not swaying the Priest into revealing much. Instead he told Loona; "But if you could, keep an eye on her for the rest of the evening. Make sure that she's alright."

Loona nodded in silent agreement, looking back at Svetlana and her little friend group roughly in the middle of the floor. No, she didn't know who the girl was looking for, but Loona did feel an ounce of sympathy for who was still, for all intents and purposes, a complete stranger. Nevertheless, the hellhound figured that she would watch out for the stranger; after all, she was the only one so far to show her outward kindness in this place, aside from Father Aleksander. Responsibility was never Loona's favorite, but regardless of her likes and dislikes, she felt an obligation to show courtesy and compassion — but only if need be. She couldn't risk herself becoming too sappy and close.

The night went on, with Loona returning to the table where she continued to talk and get to know that small group. She had largely shelved her concerns for Svetlana, who appeared to have stopped looking for whoever was meant to arrive. Whether that was because she purposefully or involuntarily forgot about this 'him' was up to Loona's wildest guess. For the hour and a bit that Loona talked, the more her mood and comfort took a turn for the better, the woes of the world receding until they became nothing more than a blur. The sands of time move quickly if spent wisely, as was the case with Loona for before she even knew it, the "party" was over. A sluggish stream of people beginning to leave formed through the entrance way, coming to an end outside in the courtyard where those who attended chose to loiter. Amongst this crowd was Loona, twisting and turning between rows of people to escape the build-up which threatened to envelop her — she never was good with crowds.

With a night well spent and filled with a sense of satisfaction, Loona was ready to call it a "day" and head home. But that was until she noticed a figure up ahead. She was walking ahead of the crowd with hands tucked into her skirt pockets, and her head fixed straightforwardly. See Loona recognized the figure to be Svetlana the very second she noticed her, the biggest giveaway being her brown, wavy bob-cut hair and long black skirt which swayed freely with each step. As soon as Loona saw her, Father Aleksander's words of advice echoed through her head, beckoning her to act upon it.

And act upon it she did; "Svetlana? Svetlana!" Loona called out, her voice shrill over the dull, monotonous noise from the crowds.

Svetlana stopped and looked behind her as Loona came up to her in a brisk walk. “Oh, Loona! Hello,” the bob-haired girl greeted back with a smile.

“Hey!” Loona smiled right back, letting out a huff as she said; “Hey look, thanks for being so nice tonight. I really appreciate it.”

“Of course, anytime!” Was the cheery response from the young woman, her voice carried softly in the wind; “Did you like it at all?”

“Yeah, surprisingly! It was good, I liked it,” Loona said with an upbeat chime. Then she realized she was getting sidetracked, deviating away from the reason she caught up with the young adult akin to herself. Loona’s smile faded a bit as she got back on track; “But hey, uh.. just thought I should ask. Are you okay?”

“Me? Yeah I’m okay, peachy! Why do you ask?”

“Nothing, nothing. Just noticed you were looking over me to the front door a couple of times. Kinda thought you were looking for someone.”

Immediately as Loona mentioned this, Svetlana’s own smile dimmed into pursed lips. Her voice which had a certain thick-accented charm to it too lost its cheerful luster; “Ah. Yeah, that. U-Um.. it’s nothing, Loona, I wouldn’t worry about it if I were you.”

Loona’s earlier belief that something was wrong had just been confirmed, thus giving her reason to hand out some advice; “But if it’s affecting you, don’t you think you should talk about it?”

But Svetlana just shook her head, her eyes holding a pensive and saddened look; “What’s the point though, dwelling on it? It won’t change the fact that he didn’t come.”

“Who didn’t come?”

“…Uncle Nikita.” The name slipped out like a lone droplet of oil, each syllable heavy and sluggish, like the sound of said droplet trickling into an even larger pool of oil below. Loona could tell that

Svetlana didn't mean to reveal her troubles from the sudden realization in her eyes.

Suddenly it all made sense to Loona, the realization appearing on her face a little too freely. It was then that she recalled at some point in the last hour, Svetlana did passively mention something about an uncle of hers once or twice, but it wasn't mentioned in the sad temperament that it had been now. Stifling herself, the disguised hellhound attempted to console the Slavic girl; "O-Ohh… Shit. Svetlana, I'm sorry, that sounds rough. It's a hell of a thing when people don't show up. Trust me, I would know. I've been there."

Svetlana nodded in meek silence, her eyes averting away and staring off into space. She sighed as a soft smile appeared on her face; like a meager candle light, small and feeble, fending itself against the darkness in the gloomiest of filth-ridden cellars. Through her smile, Svetlana whispered to Loona in a delicate squeak; "Thank you. I just hope he gets better. … Can you walk with me? My car's just up here," the Slavic girl informed and pointed to the car park just up ahead.

"Fine by me," Loona stated, barely hesitating to walk alongside a newfound friend, or at least someone who she was remotely cordial with.

As the two young women strolled alongside each other, Svetlana sighed and began to let out as much as she felt comfortable to; "He's a good uncle, Loona, he really is, and a good man at that, too. I've known him since childhood, he's my father's brother. Used to look after me when I was just a baby whenever mother and father went out for the night." A muffled half-laugh broke through Svetlana's closed smile; "Hmph… I used to call him 'Uncle Kita'. I still do sometimes, whenever I see him. One thing I noticed as I got older is just how sad he is. As in, he looks like he's always got some underlying thing happening inside that brain of his, but he never talks about it. It's like he can't let go of something, I can tell. I tried asking mama or papa about it, but they just tell me the same thing; 'leave it' and whatnot. But I'm naturally curious, so that's led me to more questions than answers."

"I'm like that a bit, too," Loona remarked respectfully, listening to every single thing that Svetlana had to say. She added further; "You want to know and to help everyone to the best of your ability, but others try to stop you from doing that."

That feeling of compassion didn't falter inside the hellhound as she continued to listen and talk to the troubled, young Svetlana, for she knew exactly just how it felt. She knew sadness like an old, despicable "friend", or a wretched foe who refused to leave. Either or, Loona felt in some inexplicable way that it was her duty to listen. Her 'heart' throbbed with a burning sensation — a burning, compassionate heart.

“Right??” Svetlana agreed with Loona’s observation with a nod, chuckling a little bit with a smile; “*Heheh... Hmph.* But I get it, maybe they don’t want me to bother Uncle with questions he wouldn’t be comfortable with. I still want to know though, you know?”

“Mhm. I get you,” Loona assured in understanding. Suddenly the urge to give advice appeared in the forefront of her mind, which in turn went to her tongue; “One thing I’ve learnt is that people are confusing. Not that it’s inherently a bad thing, like c’mon, I’m confusing to some people. But because we’re all confusing in our own ways, it takes time to fully understand those who we want to see eye-to-eye with.”

“You can say that again,” Svetlana tittered lightly, turning her eyes to the church ground’s small car park they now stood on. A lone white Toyota hatchback sat alone in one of the spots, this one obviously belonging to Svetlana, made evidently so when she fished a set of car keys from her pocket and used them to unlock the vehicle. Svetlana opened the car door and was about to get in, but froze and stood behind it, turning back to Loona and said; “If only it wasn’t that way, you know what I mean? Maybe if people were more open, there’d be less confusion and heartbreak.”

This made Loona nod affirmatively; “That’s what I’m saying! You wouldn’t know how many people I know who are exactly like that. Then those people know other people who are like them too, and all you get is a clusterfuck of confusion! But anyway, um.. I hope whatever’s happening with your uncle, that it gets resolved soon.”

“I doubt it. But thank you,” Svetlana spoke softly; “I’ll see you later, yeah?”

“Pfft! Not making any promises,” Loona replied in a spat of dry humor, watching as Svetlana slipped into her car and started the engine. And so it was that Loona’s night ended on a relatively high note, a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction putting her under a peace-inducing spell. For the longest time in a while, the hellhound felt as though she achieved something as she left the church grounds, stepping off into the night to head for home. What exactly that ‘something’ was, Loona wasn’t exactly sure of yet. Somewhere deep down, in a part of her mind only reserved for a more curious side of her, there began to grow a strange fondness for these “enemies of the state”. And with that, with her desire to explore this part of the world quenched for the time being, and a night well spent, Loona went home.

Mere Bureaucracy

The tires of Stolas' jet black chauffeur car rumbled up the long grit driveway leading up to Lucifer's colossal palace, a row of twisted charcoal-black leafless trees on either side shrouding the vehicle beneath them with their unsightly, malformed branches. Inside in the rear seat was Stolas, wearing a pair of reading glasses as his eyes skimmed over the array of mind-numbing paperwork in his hands. A formal meeting between the "King" of Hades and the goetia took place on a monthly basis in the form of an audience, the discussions of which consisted mainly of highly technical bureaucratic matters which would drive any amateur insane. Luckily Stolas had an odd liking for monotonous paperwork, thus making these meetings that bit easier for him, though he never enjoyed them. In saying such, business was business, and someone had to do it — the goetia prince knew this well.

"We're almost there, Sir," Stolas' personal driver, an imp with short and stunted horns, who wore an etched prestigious name badge which read "Koen", announced in a polite and reserved manner.

"Mhm. Of course," Stolas passively muttered in an unfocused tone, his full attention drowned in the sea of paperwork gripped in his fingers. He pinched the leftmost corner of the top document in the pile, peeling it back to peer at the second sheet of paper in line. With sharp, analyzing eyes, Stolas flicked between the first and second document a few times, making sure that everything was in order. It was, just as it should be. Using his idle left hand, Stolas grabbed a pocket stapler which sat on its side on the seat beside him, using it to clip all twenty of the pages together. With his attention now free, the goetia prince looked out the window and said; "I must ask of you something, driver."

"Of course, Sir," The quiet personal chauffeur driver of ten years obliged without hesitation; "And what would that question be?"

"I don't suppose you'd know what kind of mood Lucifer will be in today," Stolas remarked wonderingly, pivoting his head away from the window and towards his strictly front-facing driver; "How do you suppose he'll be?"

"Well, I… I-I can't say for certain," 'Koen' said, slowing the pace of the vehicle which marked the halfway point of the seemingly mile-long driveway; "I do hope that he's better. For our sake, your highness."

Stolas half-chuckled, then said in dry humor; "I've known him for far too long to understand he'll never be *"okay"*, dear Koen. He's a permanent brooder, that man, always has been."

“That is one good way of putting it, Sir,” the driver complimented, a small smirk appearing on his face.

The goetia prince squeezed out a chuckle; “Hmph! Indeed it is. You remember the month prior, don’t you? Surely you remember that unseemly episode from him.”

Koen let out a pained groan; “Like it was yesterday...”

“For two hours, my dear Koen, *two whole hours* he was bickering about his daughter!” Stolas exclaimed to refresh both his and his driver’s memories; “How does one do it without going over the edge! Such an enigma that fallen angel is, good Sir, such an enigma. We didn’t even address anything during that audience, all because of his blasted gripes!”

“Wasn’t there another incident? The one before the rant about his daughter,” the driver mentioned in a sudden jog of his memory.

“Ohh, yes-yes, that one!” Stolas shouted excitedly, a huge grin painting his face akin to the mask of comedy. He then imitated the fallen angel mockingly in an exaggerated voice; *“For forty days I tried, Stolas! For forty days! I offered him entire kingdoms!!”* Both goetia and driver fell into a fit of riotous guffawing, their cackles reverberating and bouncing against the interior like the sound of great symbols! The laughter died down just as quickly as it arose, composure returning to restore order in the prince’s car-sized court. Stolas cleared his throat after feeling as though he might pass out, choking out after his fit of laughter; “*Ohohoo… Ahem!* But yes, that is our Lucifer, and he is much the handful.”

“Too right you are, good Sir,” ‘Koen’ agreed in a petering-off manner, still looking straight ahead down the black, brown, and red path.

Stolas shifted in his seat to make himself more comfortable, and as he did so he said; “My family has been at his side for generations, Koen. Did you know this?”

“So I’ve heard, your highness,” the driver informed the prince in a short, simple reply.

“Quite. I am the one-hundred-and-nineteenth male heir of my family’s lineage, and the sixteenth of my first namesake. For every single generation, without fail, we have been by Lucifer’s side without compromise,” Stolas educated, flawlessly pronouncing every word as fact and sounding more like a recital of sorts than anything else. Yes, the goetia lineage went way back, being connected to numerous social and political apparatuses throughout hell’s long, twisted history.

“I imagine that comes with its fair share of headaches,” Koen remarked, shuddering at the thought of being condemned to being Lucifer’s right-hand man.

Stolas rolled his eyes and let out a tired sigh, rubbing the ridge of his feathered brow; “You wouldn’t know the half of it.”

Koen made one final comment on the matter; “Such is life…” And then all fell silent between chauffeur and his employer, with nothing else left to be said. Suddenly the chauffeur driver announced at short notice; “We’re just about here now, your highness.”

At once Stolas looked back up and ahead, seeing that, as forewarned, he was ‘just about there’. There standing at the end of the tree-shrouded road was a cul-de-sac with a disused fountain in the center, and standing behind that completely dwarfing the feature was a colossus. Lucifer’s palace was as big as it was imposing, rising up to four stories high and a total length which went on for yards and yards in either direction. A massive portico with four towering pillars and a spire-like roof guarded the entrance, a scene which Stolas had seen countless times before. And no matter how many times before the goetia prince had seen it, his dislike for the place still bothered him. The potency of the devil’s own hubris made the entire palace and its surroundings stink with a prideful, humility-less odor.

At last the car rolled up to the short and wide flight of stairs up to the entrance, the doorway guarded by two humongous dark hades-oak doors. The driver turned his head behind to glance at his master, asking him; “Shall I escort you up there, Sir?”

But Stolas waved his hand in dismissal; “No no, I’ll be fine from here, thank you. Do wait here until I come back out.” And so the owl prince let himself out of the car, fixing up his waistcoat and cape before strutting up the stairs with documents underneath his right arm. There was a permanent and discomforting damp chill which lingered in this particularly unpleasant part of hell, especially in the direct vicinity of Lucifer’s dwelling; it was like this was the epicenter for all things which were wrong with hades, such was the consensus with many a wise philosopher. As soon as he arrived at the front door, Stolas rapped his knuckles against the surface — ***DOK—DOK—DOK!!*** — the sound of which was echoey and almost distant like the acoustics of a vast cave. Thus started the waiting game for an answer, a game which lasted no more than half a minute when the doors creaked open. There, standing on the other side with one hand on the door hinge, was Lucifer’s so-

titled ‘Grand Councilor’. The mutton-chopped imp looked up at the goetia, and delivered a greeting; “I bid you good morning, your highness.”

“Good morning, Mister Tarenk,” Stolas greeted back; “I’m here for the audience.”

“And so you are,” the ‘Grand Councilor’ acknowledged; “Do follow me. His majesty has been waiting.”

And like a personification of Fritz to Lucifer as Frankenstein, the loyal servant of many decades led the aristocrat deeper into the devil’s luxurious yet desolate palace. A chandelier hung high above Stolas’ head which flickered with a barely decent light, trying its best to do the job that it was built to do, albeit with mixed results. The great entrance hall gave way to a wide open doorway which both Lucifer’s ‘Grand Councilor’ and Stolas walked right through, leading into a hallway with rooms behind closed doors on either side. As the goetia headed further down the corridor, the potent musky smell of cigar smoke began to emerge like a rising invisible mist, seeping into the very molecular fiber of the air the prince breathed. One thing that Stolas had learned over the years he had worked with Lucifer was the reclusive king’s love for cigars, flavored ones in particular. He had a flavor for every occasion and every situation, the flavor he smoked depended on how he was feeling — Liquorice for if he was in his better moods, and toffee in times of anger. On this occasion, Stolas would clearly smell the scent of cedar — from this scent alone, he could tell exactly what Lucifer’s mood was.

“Afraid…” Stolas muttered just under his breath, his eyes narrowing with perplexion. What was making the recluse afraid? Perhaps the prince would find out soon enough, whether he wanted to or not.

At last Lucifer’s ‘Grand Councilor’ and Stolas reached the end of the hallway, finding themselves in the fallen angel’s high-ceiling day room. There, standing with his back facing the two men and his arms folded, was the devil himself. After a short and polite knock from the ‘Grand Councilor’, Lucifer croaked in acknowledgment a low and dreary; “Yes?”

“Prince Stolas, Sire,” the tall imp announced formally, stepping aside to allow Stolas to walk right through. Once the goetia stepped clear of the doorway and into the living quarters, Tarenk excused himself and closed the doors.

And with that, the monthly audience began.

With the safety of much needed privacy assured, Lucifer slowly turned himself around with his arms folded and hugged against himself, his hands cupping both of his elbows. A look of discomfort plagued the recluse's eyes like a million locusts as he looked towards Stolas who looked back with intrigue. Finally Lucifer croaked, wisps of spare cigar smoke floating through his lips; "Ah. And so you have come."

"As is required of me," Stolas replied; "Are you alright?"

Lucifer didn't reply. It was as if he couldn't bring himself to. He avoided the question altogether, freeing one crossed arm to gesture to a pair of lounge chairs in the middle of the room; "Doth sitteth down, Stolas. We wilt commit to business."

Stolas said nothing more as he sat down in tandem with the king of Hades, daring not to press further on to question his well-being in reservation of what may come. While the goetia prince sat gracefully down in his own designated lounge chair, Lucifer slumped down in his like a lead weight, looking as though all of his energy had been completely sapped from his sickeningly skeletal frame. Perhaps the 'lead weight' analogy was more literal, the centuries of suffering, hubris, and decay forcing the wretched ruler in his seat for respite which would never come — his eyes certainly reflected that. But as the old saying goes; "The show must go on."

And "go on" the show did, with Lucifer leaning forwards in his chair as he clasped his hands together in a boney-fingered ball. He asked Stolas; "Alloweth us to begin. First, finances. How is't looking?"

"All seems to be well," Stolas at once reported, looking down at the document in his hands and flipping to roughly the fifteenth page. Like a true bureaucrat perfected in his craft of reciting words, the prince began to inform; "As of the past month according to the most recent report from the Nine Realms Exchequer, that is the N.R.E., there has been a slight spending increase of three-point-five percent, which is anomalous yet not completely unusual for this time of year. This is to accommodate for the expenses of both the autonomous Sins' personal exchequers, and public spending. Net profits have risen by three-point-nine percent, which in turn covers the cost of the anomalous spending increase."

"Understood," Lucifer uttered with a groan, his eyes glaring off at nothing in particular; "And from where doth these spending increases cometh?"

"It seems the majority of the spending increases come from the Gluttony and Greed Exchequers respectively," Stolas made aware in his usual posh tone.

The news came as no shock to Lucifer; “Oh of course. Of course it wast from those two, wherefore wouldn’t it beest? I gage, those two art relentless in how they spendeth their wage, Stolas. It’s sheer luck yond we haven’t fallen into the pit of recession yet.”

“As has been the case for a while,” Stolas concurred; “I’m sure we will manage for another few good decades.”

“Aye. Let fate alloweth it to be so,” the devil grumbled, his left leg twitching with a light rhythmic bounce. The wretched king rubbed his hands together before gesturing a spinning finger towards the owl prince; “Law enforcement, mine own valorous Sir, how is yond looking?”

At once Stolas flicked the pages over, delving deeper into the collection of stapled files before stopping at page twenty-nine. The contents of the page glared right back at its reader, beckoning him to announce it to his superior who waited in feigned patience for the details. After adjusting his reading glasses, Stolas informed; “It seems to be going… poorly, Sir. The detachments in Pride Ring especially have seen an uptick in disorder over the past two months, as a result of the seismic Overlord hegemony. Loans haven’t been paid, evictions haven’t been enforced, and incidents between Hellborn and Sinners have increased.”

“I’m going to beest completely truthful with thee, Stolas, I hath lost *all* desire in restoring order in Pride. They’ve all got no more brain than stone, and cannot critically think to safeth their lives. Wherefore wouldst those inebriates obey enforcement? They’ll endeth up acting within their syndicates anyhow. After all, those Overlords, to which I have met many, they keepeth the Hellborn in checketh themselves.” This was a rather defeatist point of view from Lucifer to be sure, but one which he seemed oddly comfortable with.

Such a conviction towards syndicates in Hell was unheard of from Lucifer — Stolas knew this all too well, and to hear it being blurted out loud and clear from the disgraced angel confused him. This was cause for him to ask; “Sir, forgive me, but I must ask. Are you alright?”

A look of deep contempt was set alight like a switch in Lucifer’s eyes as soon as Stolas dared question his condition. Now the prince in question was a very powerful man in Hell’s political and social landscape, after all he held great influence in both fields and thus was greatly sought after by assassins. Despite holding such power and influence, there was something about Lucifer’s dagger eyes which sent a horrible chill up his spine. The devil leant back in his seat, his eyes not once leaving Stolas as he asked in a hiss; “Doth bid me, Stolas. If’t be true thee were in the position yond I am, dealing with issues of the ingrafter and then some, would thee beest, as thee sayeth, ‘alright’?”

“I… I can’t say for certain—”

“So then wherefore doth thee questioneth me?”

“Who says I am questioning you? I’m only asking out of goodwill.”

“For goodwill, the Sir sayeth…” The repeated words slid out of the disgraced king’s mouth like a writhing serpent, abruptly collapsing into a wretched heap upon the ground. His fingers, still clasped together, drummed rhythmically in brooding thought, only to settle down and cease when Lucifer uttered; “Since at which hour hast anyone given me a bethought of goodwill? At least thee doth, Stolas. At least thee doth.”

“Something exceptional troubles you,” Stolas pointed out, being a man who was good at deciphering emotions in his business partner of many years.

“Yond it doest,” Lucifer replied with troubled eyes.

In turn, Stolas pressed; “And what might that be?”

“A troubling incident, mine own valorous Sir. Might thee has’t hath heard the news, about Mammon?”

“I have not, no,” the owl prince replied, clueless as to what this was all leading up to.

“Ah. So that gent hasn’t allowed that from which he speaks runneth wild with the temptation to spread rumor. Good. I am surprised, pleasantly.” Lucifer’s eyes, full of agitation and an apparent emerging paranoia, turned to the left of Stolas, glaring behind him towards the door which led out to the palace entrance — He was making sure what he was about to say was completely private. With this made sure of, Lucifer’s focus returned to Stolas, a stone-cold look on his face emerging as he said; “There is talketh, just from Mammon at least, about a disturbance.”

“What kind of disturbance?” Stolas asked.

Great reluctance cloaked Lucifer’s dancing eyes as they shifted in thought, momentarily looking towards the ground before he said; “I’m not sure yet. Sooth beest toldeth, I loath to pinpoint it to one thing. All I knoweth for sure is that Mammon hast been injured — a burn on his hand. Anon, we burneth not easily, Stolas, thee knoweth this. How doth thee bethink that gent wast burnt?”

“I-I suppose magic, from the sounds of things.”

Lucifer shook his head at this suggestion; “Nay, nay not charm. Yond’s what we doth. Cometh on, Sir, useth yond expansive mind of yours.”

The individual gears in Stolas’ head began to turn further, his eyes reflecting this when they squinted in ponderance. Now the goetia prince was smart, a well-read aristocratic gentleman who knew how to use his intelligence and extensive knowledge to his advantage when he saw it fit. He knew all sorts of things, from fields such as botany, astrology, biology, and history just to name a select few. This ability of his served Stolas well, his eyes slightly widening in realization. “*No*... N-No, that isn’t right. You’re not insinuating that… So of this burn, Lucifer, how did it end up on his hand?”

“From what I has’t been toldeth, Mammon — being the halfwait yond that gent is — got himself into an altercation with a Hellhound. A Hellhound out of all things, that hotheaded dumbass. I am acknown yond her name is ‘Loona’.”

“Right. I-I see,” Stolas stuttered in a fleeting voice, a pit in his stomach forming the instant this news was revealed to him. His calm and collected facade which he usually put on for these audiences began to show cracks, his thoughts wandering off onto the focus on Blitz’s daughter. He had been thinking on-and-off about that particular hellhound to the point that he had become weary of her, going so far to prohibit her from using the grimoire without supervision. But this was all in the spirit of caution of course, just in case. He still remembered the night she fended him off when he went feral, and he had the burn scars underneath his chest and arm feathers to prove it. Something was amiss.

Though Stolas’ sudden uneasiness was hard to miss, Lucifer took no notice of it, and if he did which he must have, then he was being wilfully ignorant. The wicked ruler’s fingers clacked against the armrest, taking a deep breath before he said; “Seldom has’t there ever been the thought of external influence in over two-thousand years. I remember yond day, that horrible day when ***‘He’*** came. … Soon as he offered eternal Elysium as he stood by the gates, Sinners left in droves in

the millions— no… in the billions, Stolas. They all left, liketh obedient heifers to their herder. Aye, that wast the lasteth timeth there wast a breach in this realm of Hades. I do not wish to witness it once more."

Now see Stolas knew all of this and then some, after all he had been taught extensively about it as a cautionary tale in his childhood, as was part and parcel of being the heir of such high authority. But to hear it all again this time, considering his earlier suspicions on Loona, it had even more weight than the prince had ever known before; the danger, that distant danger, felt that much more imminent. After a second of stunned silence, Stolas assured; "I'm sure it won't ever happen again. It hasn't over the past two-thousand years, why would it now?"

"Alas, that I am not certain of," Lucifer replied with a gruff exhale, curling both sets of fingers into a ball and squeezing them tightly. Suddenly it looked as though a thought made itself known to the devil, his eyes locking into a blank stare and all movement from his fidgeting hands ceased. This stillness ended when Lucifer took a breath, then said; "Come with me."

"Where to?" Stolas asked, confused.

Like the decrepit almost skeletal figure that he was, Lucifer heaved himself up back onto his feet with a sickening crack of his joints. Stark white clothes peeled off the back of his lounge chair as their wearer straightened himself upright, with Stolas in turn getting up alongside him. "To my Study, post-haste. I must showeth thee something," Lucifer told the prince with a firm look on his bleached-white face, deep caverns carving themselves along his forehead and cheeks in a testament to his ancient age. And so Stolas followed the devil to his study, watching as he pushed the door wide open and allowed them both inside. Soon as the prince stepped inside, Lucifer pushed the door completely shut, then in an unexpected turn locked it tightly with all three locks.

Stolas noticed this and grew even more confused, if not mildly suspicious. While Lucifer always acted a bit strange, this was by far the strangest the goetia had seen him act — he looked tense, almost paranoid. His paranoia stance was maintained all the way to the back wall of his study behind his desk, freezing as soon as he reached the direct vicinity of a large archaic safe, cleverly hidden behind a painting which Lucifer had just pulled down. Instead of numbers for the combination lock, there were a series of dials with confounding hieroglyphs imprinted onto them in a mysterious blue ink. At once Lucifer's tendril fingers rolled the four dials methodically until a loud ***"Click!"*** was heard, the sound of which appeared strangely echoey and vibrated against the walls and shelves surrounding the two men. The devil froze and stood amidst the eerie silence like he was dithering, thinking with much hesitation on what to do next. Then he spoke, still staring at the unlocked safe; "What I am about to showeth thee is something which barely anyone hast bore witness to, or knoweth the existence of. What thou art about to seeth must be kept secret, until of course if't be true it's completely behoveful to use it. Yond means thee wilt keepeth quiet about it, and thee shouldst never tell anyone about this, for thy own good. Doth thee understand?"

Stolas, left with no other choice, agreed.

“Valorous,” Lucifer nodded softly; “I trusteth thee, Stolas. Do not break that.” The big reveal finally came when Lucifer, with his hand gripping the black cast iron handle, pulled the thick door open to reveal what lay inside.

The goetia prince’s eyes widened with awe as he looked into the safe, for he recognized what lay inside. He might never have seen it in his lifetime, but his father via his servants had told him of what Lucifer possessed, though they kept quiet about what exactly it was. The vague descriptions that Stolas had heard, the geometry of it, the stark coloring; it was all there, laying before him like a pot full of the most luxurious of gold, or the lost knowledge of an ancient forgotten civilization. Stolas tried to speak through his awe; “Is… I-Is that…”

“Yond it is,” Lucifer nodded; “A prized possession. One yond I cannot afford for dissidents to knoweth of unless, as I hath said, t’is completely behoveful.”

“No… *Nonono...*” Stolas stammered, finally diverting his eyes away from the safe’s contents; “You wouldn’t use it, surely not. There mustn’t be any need to!”

At last Lucifer turned around to face the prince standing behind him, shooting him a look which commanded respect for his conviction. His eyes studied Stolas’ demeanor like a vulture to a corpse, silently brooding on the goetia’s reservations. After a while he placed a hand on the visitor’s shoulder, then gurgled simply; “Well that depends, does it not?”

And depend it did, Stolas knew that well.

The exhaustion of a long day at work quickly turned into dread when the elevator doors rolled open. Loona stared down the hallway to see a familiar silhouette in white, standing halfway down the corridor right in front of her apartment door, lightly rocking on his invisible heels in a sign of growing impatience. Just the sight alone agitated Loona more than it disturbed her, reminding her that today was ‘the day’. “You’ve got to be shitting me…” Loona jeered a smidgeon above her breath, just loud enough for Blitz to hear.

“What’s wrong, Loonie-pie?” Blitz asked out of confusion, only for him to turn and realize what his daughter was referring to. His brow instantly sharpened with the same agitation Loona felt; “Ohh, fuck me dead…” the imp growled, running an open palm down his face.

No warm welcomes were planned from the two residents of the apartment, but this didn’t sway the white-cladded figure’s demeanor who noticed both Loona and Blitz approaching. His red eagle eye immediately turned to Loona who led the charge, followed by his sly, irritating voice; “Ach, Loona! Guten tag! Long time, no see.”

“Sure,” Loona replied bluntly, followed by a harsh; “What do you want?”

“Oh nothing at all, Loona,” Ritter assured with an invisible smile; “I’m only here to act on what was agreed on.”

“Now listen here, wise guy, we didn’t agree to shit,” the hellhound growled affirmatively, a finger jabbed at the authority’s way; “We’re only tolerating you ‘cause we don’t have any other choice.”

Only adding to Loona’s frustration was what Ritter did next. In an almost provocative way, Ritter wagged a black-gloved finger at the clearly annoyed resident, telling her; “*Tsk-tsk-tsk!* There it is again, Loona, that temper! I assure you it will be your undoing if you do not keep it in check.”

“Uh, no! Sorry, but she can be as pissed off as you as she likes, fuck you very much!” Blitz squawked as an interjection, quickly pulling Loona into a protective hug.

“Of course, of course,” Ritter replied with a dismissive wave of his hand, obviously not impressed by either of their conduct — Such was the Sinner’s high expectations regarding etiquette and discipline. He continued; “Wie auch immer, bitte! Let’s–, *uh*, get this over with, ja? I’ll be out of your hair soon enough.”

“Like we’ve got a say…” Loona grumbled, unlocking the door into the apartment and pushing it open. Out of pure compulsion, the hellhound impatiently asked; “Is this really necessary?”

“I don’t do things which aren’t necessary,” Ritter replied; “This here, what I’m doing now, is just… well… think of it as mere bureaucracy. It's nothing personal, I assure you.”

Loona rolled her eyes at this and shook her head, begrudgingly stepping aside once in her apartment to allow Ritter to begin his inspection. And so the self-proclaimed Bureaucrat got to work, his hands clasped together in front of his waist in an abnormally relaxed manner, his head turning this way and that in such a casual way that it looked like he felt no danger at all. The Sinner's head stopped when his good eye locked onto the leftmost wall, noticing the vast array of unframed pictures coating the entire wallpaper. "Oh! I see we're photographers in here," Ritter remarked, pointing to one particular photo of the entire I.M.P. staff; Loona herself, Blitz — albeit with his face scribbled out, Millie, and Moxxie.

"Hey! Quit gawking at my photos, you fuckin' creep!" Blitz barked, sliding himself between the observant Sinner and the vast selection of photos, his arms sprawled out either direction to obscure viewing further.

Ritter's response was clear and concise; "I'm not interested in your nostalgia and multicolored horse drawings, Herr Blitz, I am here to meet an intelligence quota."

"Then look elsewhere! I promise there's nothing here for your ass to see!" Blitz fumed, waving his hand at the official furiously to get him away.

Of course Ritter was unphased by the 'lesser's' uncooperation, though he moved away on his own accord, pacing around the rest of the apartment and scanning every little detail. Meticulous was the search, and tense was the atmosphere, and every second Loona felt the discomfort grow ever stronger. But she had nothing to hide, didn't she? So what was there to be worried about? As the horse's mouth said, he'd be out of her hair in no time at all. All that was needed was some reluctant cooperation; at least, so she hoped. Just as Ritter was about to invite himself to the kitchen, he paused and spun around on his heel, pointing casually towards Loona. He asked; "How is your pursuit of art going, Fraulein Loona?"

Loona shrugged with her arms folded; "Alright, I guess. Haven't drawn in it since the day you last came. Why?"

"Would you mind if I had a look inside?"

"In what, the sketchbook?"

“Ja!” Ritter insisted; “Just a quick look inside, nothing much.”

This provoked a scoff from Loona; “Hmph. Weird thing to ask, but okay. Fine, if it gets you outta here any faster.”

“You cannot rush the machinations of bureaucracy,” the Sinner replied with an authoritative posture, watching as Loona grabbed her sketchbook from out of her room and returned to him with it. The hellhound shoved the book in Ritter’s hand, who replied with a soft “danke” before flipping it open. Humored was the informant who fulfilled his duties by analyzing the contents of Loona’s sketchbook, finding before him in his hands nothing but a few mindless doodles, and the blank-faced full body pose the young woman had drawn a few days prior. He chuckled lightly then commented; “Yes. Indeed you are much the artist. I’m impressed, I’ve got to say.”

“Whatever,” Loona coldly replied with a dismissive wave, being in no mood to accept compliments, waiting with growing impatience for the informant to give her belongings back. Thankfully the intruder did, closing the sketchbook before handing it back to its owner who plucked it out of his grip. Within maintained tension did Loona watch as Ritter moved swiftly on with his inspection, rhythmically waltzing his way heel-and-toe into the kitchen with both hands clasped behind his back.

Just as the eagle-eyed Sinner strangely enough searched the drawers, Blitz shuffled himself beside his daughter and whispered; “This guy’s a fucking nutcase. Seriously, the pantry?”

“That’s where he wants to search,” Loona said quietly.

“But why?” Blitz asked, dumbfounded; “It’s a fucking pantry!”

“Just let him do it, shut up,” Loona huffed, allowing the process to continue against her will.

“You should listen to your daughter, Herr Blitz,” Ritter commented from the kitchen, just wrapping up his search of the fridge; “She is very smart.”

Blitz sneered; “I’m having a private conversation, dickface! Keep out of it!”

“Not when *I’m* here,” the inspector replied, the tail-end of his response ending with a light yet unsettling growl. With an abrupt shut of the fridge door which made it rattle, Ritter silently rejoined the occupants of the apartment, his good eye flitting around the apartment for a brief look before announcing with a clasp of his hands; “Now! That should be me done.”

“Oh shoot, already?” Loona blurted out in a bout of mild surprise, having prepared herself for something a bit more vigorous.

“Yes, yes, I’m afraid so,” Ritter nodded; “The much awaited conclusion, yes?”

“Okay great, awesome, yada-yada! You can leave now, *goodbyeee!!*” Blitz responded with heavy sarcasm, the forced smile and look he gave to the visitor showing his deep contempt for him.

“But there is one more thing before I leave you two alone,” the inspector added, flicking an indifferent glance at Blitz before looking directly at Loona; “Your room, Fraulein. May I have a look at it?”

After hearing Blitz hiss a hardly hidden *“Oh Satan fucking dammit”* through his gritted teeth, Loona replied; “For fuck sake, anything else! Do you want me to serve you wine while you’re at it, too?”

“That would be wonderful, how kind of you,” Ritter said with an invisible smirk and a shift in tone which resonated quick wit.

Loona groaned and rolled her eyes, knowing full well of what she had to do. She led the increasingly intrusive Sinner over to her bedroom and opened the door halfway. The hellhound said; “There. This is all you’re going to see of it. And you’re not stepping inside, so don’t ask.”

Surprisingly enough the inspector abided by Loona’s adamance, merely peeking through the slither of space which the hellhound provided to him. Loona’s eyes were fixated upon the Sinner, the urge to tear out his throat for even daring to intrude into her privacy was at its most intense, though she kept herself at bay, knowing the danger of doing so. Just as Loona thought this was all going to be straightforward, she saw that the inspector’s eye was fixated on one particular spot, though she couldn’t figure out what it was. This unnerved her; what was there to focus on? Loona’s sudden concern was slightly alleviated when the Sinner seemed to pay no further attention to the mystery focus point, continuing on with scanning the rest of the hellhound’s room. After seeing what he

apparently wanted to see, Ritter turned back to Loona and said; “Gut. Sehr gut. You see what happens when you cooperate? No problems, none at all.”

“Whatever you say,” Loona said flatly, having no energy to argue the point.

Affirmative and final was Ritter’s silent nod to her, confirming that his inspection was over. He turned away from Loona to acknowledge a still clearly agitated Blitz, giving him the same nod then asked; “No hard feelings, Sir. It’s only bureaucracy.”

“Uh-huh, yeah right. So does that mean your bootlicking pervert ass is leaving now, or do you want to check out my dildo drawer, too?” Blitz asked with great impatience.

It was no secret that Blitz was a complete foreigner to the idea of “time and a place to throw insults”, and out of all the people in Hell, Loona especially knew this. On many an occasion it was this imp’s tendency to run his mouth which got him into trouble, and on many an occasion it was Loona who had the task of bailing him out forced upon her. This “get out of jail” card which Blitz was seemingly so used to relying on was quickly reaching its expiry date, and Loona swore at this very moment that she would disown her father if he said one more provocative thing to add fuel to the steadily growing fire. If looks could speak, the pupil daggers which Loona was giving Blitz at that very moment would be screaming the phrase *“Shut the fuck up”* over and over.

But despite the imp’s insistence to be aggressive towards him, Ritter didn’t react, merely staring at him and answering; “It means I am done.” And that he was, leaving both imp and hellhound daughter to their right to privacy, shutting the door behind him without another word.

Cold and bitter was the silence which permeated the air around Loona and Blitz, the pair of them feeling a mutual weight lifted off their shoulders. While the uneased yet defiant hellhound stared intensely at the front door, Blitz looked around to see if the now departed intruder hadn’t stolen anything.

“So what now, Loona?” Blitz blurted out with his hands on his hips; “What the hell now??”

Loona continued to stare blankly at the door’s surface and sniffed, contemplating Blitz's sudden question. Soon she came to a conclusion, shrugging a little as she turned around to look at her father; “We keep going. That’s what’s going to happen,” Loona explained.

Blitz scoffed; “Oh I get it, so we just tolerate him intruding on our lives! Gotcha!”

“What else are we supposed to do, dad, fight him??” Loona shrugged with a light shout; “I don’t want this as much as you don’t, trust me. We just need to play our cards right, okay? None of this “let’s kill everyone” bullshit, that’s not going to work here.”

The imp threw his hand up, waving the proposition away; “Whatever! Just go make sure that pindick isn’t loitering out there, I don’t trust him not to do that.”

To this Loona let out a grunt, abiding by the direction and opened the front door to peer out into the corridor. She looked in either direction, finding that luckily the unwelcome Sinner was nowhere to be seen, seeming to have vanished back into the darkness from which he came. The tired hellhound sighed in relief at this, and was just about to head inside when something on the floor caught her eye; a note. Loona peered down at the slip of paper, immediately picking it up and reading what it said:

“Next inspection is on Friday. Be ready.

–Ritter, on behalf of L.M.”

Eye to Eye

The tin kettle upon a stove hissed and squealed as the water inside bubbled boisterously. Two ceramic mugs sat nearby atop the kitchen counter, both of which contained a morsel of coffee and two pinches of sugar. A pair of identical metal teaspoons sat in their respective mugs, sitting upright against the rim with the business-ends nestled in the loose and powdery coffee-sugar mixture. Shuffling around the kitchen in a tired little waltz was the fiery and enthusiastic Matriarch of the apartment with her hair in a mess, partaking in her morning downtime while her husband was still in bed, presumably still fast asleep. Unlike her husband, Millie had a tendency to be an early-riser, as had been the case since she was a child, pottering around the house and causing whatever noise she could. As was also the case in her first few years of life up until about when she finally turned five, in the form of loud, ear-splitting cries for attention in the first hours of the morning. But alas, such is the joys of parenthood, and despite its many trials and tribulations, Millie wished with all that her little heart could desire that she would one day have a family to call her own. This too was Moxxie's dream, at least from what the wrath imp could gather from the dozens of times they contemplated it together.

After preparing breakfast — that is, two pieces of toast each for both herself and her husband — Millie hopped over to the whistling kettle and took it off the burner, then with a gentle hand poured the boiling water into both mugs. Both servings were precise, the server making sure that they were exactly the same amount as each other; Millie had a perfectionist side to her after all, one which more often than not came out in the sanctuary of her home. Moxxie knew of this, and kept mindful of keeping the house as uniform and organized as possible, in part entertaining his own perfectionist tendencies. The proactive faithful wife began to stir the contents of both mugs, making sure to mix the coffee and sugar generously to make the perfect brew. Then came a dash of homemade for just one of the drinks — Moxxie liked his with a small portion of cream, whilst Millie fancied her coffee straight black and sugar to disrupt the bitter taste. With both servings now prepared, Millie grabbed both mugs by the handles in each of her hands, strutting delicately out of the kitchen and down the hallway towards the bedroom, the door slightly ajar.

The imp silently pushed the door open with her shoulder, allowing herself inside in a soft and graceful step making little to no noise. Like a mouse Millie shuffled up to Moxxie's side of the bed, finding her husband on the cusp of waking up with his eyes fluttering open. She smiled and greeted softly; "Mornin', sweetie~"

"Mmmgh… M-Morning, Mills…" Moxxie grumbled, still half asleep and groggy as he rid the sleep from his eyes with a rub.

Warm, genuine, and unwavering was Millie's smile as her husband's sweet voice graced her ears, then announced delicately; "I made ya some coffee."

Moxxie's eyes cracked open into a squint, peering tiredly at his wife; *"Did you..?"*

"Mhm! It's the usual too. I made sure to use that cream ya like," Millie cooed, going to the side of Moxxie's bedside table and set his mug down. A gentle kiss on the forehead came the greed imp's way, one which conjured up a small and tired smile across his red face. In turn and admiration for his wife, Moxxie returned the favor twofold with a quick peck on Millie's face, the pair of them blushing in this moment of sweet intimacy. Millie sat herself down on the mattress beside Moxxie who had sat himself upright and took his coffee, blowing it gently before he took a small sip. The look of satisfaction which appeared in her husband's eyes as he sipped his drink proved to Millie that she had done well, in turn making her satisfied too. After swallowing his morsel of coffee, Moxxie asked; "How was your sleep, hun?"

"It was good," Millie smiled warmly before taking a sip of her coffee; "What about yours?"

"Better," Moxxie replied, returning the warm smile — it had only been two days since he became the victim of inexplicable insomnia, only managing to get three hours of sleep at most. Suddenly a soft chuckle broke through his lips before he asked his wife; "Did you hear the neighbors last night?"

"The neighbors? N-No, can't say I did," Millie said passively with a shake of her head.

Moxxie's smirk grew wider; "Really? Sounded like a pair of Hell-Hogs fucking the way they were going at it! Woke me up at like, what, three last night?"

The wrath imp blushed at this; "O-Oh yeah?"

Moxxie nodded; "Yeah! It, uh… k-kinda made me think…"

An array of hormone-activated butterflies fluttered in Millie's stomach as she got an idea of what her husband was insinuating. With a sense of growing heat, she played along; "Ohh? What did it make you think of, dear?"

“Oh you know, n-nothing much,” Moxxie stammered a little, a timid look in his eyes emerging as he tapped his fingers together; “It’s just, *uhm*... w-well… I guess it made me think of… *uh*...”

“Of me~?” Millie interrupted with a soothing voice, a flirtatious look emerging as she patted Moxxie’s leg with an oh-so gentle hand.

Moxxie squeaked; *“Eep!* I-I mean, I-I-I guess?? They just sounded so passionate and loving and __”

A thunderous guffaw broke out from Millie who could no longer contain it, a deep blush coating her face like thick makeup. After laughing for a little longer than needed, Millie calmed herself down and said; “You’re such a sweet little blush-muffin, Mox! You sweet little gentleman, no wonder I married your little red butt~” One teaseful squeeze of his leg later sent Moxxie into a blushing spiral, burying half his face underneath the sheets to hide his bashful grin. Millie’s heart always fluttered when she saw her husband happy, and today was no exception; it seemed the old Moxxie was finally returning, his ‘closed off’ demeanor receding at a slow but sure pace. Dissociation was the disease, and the cure was Millie’s love and affection. The wrath imp, after flirting, took a second shot of her coffee before asking; “Ya sure you’re okay, hon’?”

At first Moxxie seemed confused; “How do you mean?”

“As in, like… I dunno, just wanna make sure nothin’s bothering you that you’re hiding from me,” Millie told him after dithering momentarily. It was only after she elaborated did she notice a subtle change in the way Moxxie held himself, the male imp freezing as if to think on it.

This pause didn’t last long as it was broken by Moxxie shaking his head with a smile. At one he reassured; “I’m okay, Mills.”

Millie pouted; “Are you sure?”

Moxxie nodded again; “Yep! As sure as you are pretty.”

“D’aww, you’re real sweet,” Millie chimed kindly, though her enthusiasm was dulled. No compliment was ever lost on Millie, nor was this one just put on her, but the feeling that Moxxie wasn’t telling the whole truth distracted her. Yes his overall mien had improved to a certain

comforting extent, but that didn't change the fact that something had been bothering him — Millie was a fixer, and if there was one thing she wanted to help fix without a doubt, it was Moxxie. In saying this, the wrath imp knew that this was a double-edged sword; while she wanted to know what was bothering her spouse, Millie also didn't wish to encroach on his right to privacy. But, like everything else, certain things need to be in moderation, such as secrecy lest it become outright reclusion. For the moment, however, Millie set her worries aside and respected Moxxie's privacy. With one more kiss, this time on her dearest husband's forehead, the matriarch said; "I'll go make breakfast."

Millie's step was graceful and nimble as she made her way back out the bedroom and into the kitchen, having a general idea of what she was going to make. She grabbed a pan and placed it on the burner which she turned on, the small blue flame appeared in an instant beneath the pan's base. On the menu today was something simple; eggs on toast with a teaspoon of relish, a dish from home which Millie remembered fondly from her rough-and-tumble childhood. After popping in two slices of bread into the toaster and pressing the latch down, the amateur cook cracked two eggs into the now simmering pan, the yolk and egg whites sizzling as soon as it made contact. Millie ventured off in a world of her own as she cooked, quietly humming a little tune to herself which she had just remembered in that moment. The tune in question was none other than one of Moxxie's own songs, specifically the one he wrote for their anniversary. If she wasn't handling food, Millie would be doing pirouettes around the kitchen as she let off a huge, toothy grin, singing along to the songs which her dearest Moxxie wrote for her, and only her. Breakfast was ready in no time at all, even before Millie herself knew it, the repetition of humming having managed to pass the time well. Toast, butter, fried sunny side-up eggs, and tangy relish all in that order was all that was needed for breakfast, along with a sprinkle of freshly cracked pepper for good measure.

The sound of shuffling footsteps coming up from behind Millie was cause for her to turn around, finding Moxxie with coffee in hand standing just outside with a warm smile; he had gotten out of bed just in time for his most important meal. With that sweet little smile of his which Millie had fallen in love with a thousand times over, Moxxie remarked; "That smells good! The usual?"

"The usual, with a little somethin' special," Millie added, picking up both plates and taking them to the dining table, her coffee mug balanced carefully in her tail. Moxxie followed after his wife, ready to chow down and appreciate what his sweetheart had made just for him. Being the natural gentleman that he was, the male figure in this household of two pulled the chair back for his wife, a gesture which she greatly appreciated and expressed with a little *"thank you"*. They sat down in profoundly complete unison, both looking lovingly at one another for a second before getting around to eating.

There wasn't much in the way of talk between the married couple with mouths full of food, until Moxxie remarked after swallowing a portion; "We got a big one today."

"Big what?" Millie asked curiously.

“Big target,” Moxxie elaborated, poking his meal for another bite; “At least according to Blitz. Some guy involved in some Mafia ring.”

Millie raised her eyebrows and let out a small *“oh”*, before Moxxie continued; “Yup! I’ve read the file to his name; the guy’s got a baaad history, too. Disloyal, maniacal, manipulative — you name it, this guy is it!”

“Oooooh! Sounds rough!” Millie remarked excitedly to engage in conversation, then taking another bite of her tangy serving of food. While a gentle soul around those who she cared about, Millie was more than capable of becoming like a rabid wild animal against those who she hated, utilizing that fierce energy in her day job with gruesome results.

“Sure seems like it,” Moxxie agreed; “But it’s nothing we can’t handle, right?”

“Not if you’re by my side, sugarcube~” Millie cooed softly, smiling a soft toothy smile in her husband’s direction. A bashful purr emanated from Moxxie towards Millie’s advancement, then quieting when another forkful of food entered his mouth. Millie too fell silent as her eyes returned to her food, prodding the meal with the business end of her fork and cutting herself yet another piece. Just as the mixture of egg and relish was an inch away from her mouth, Millie paused; a question had emerged which demanded to be asked. And so the imp did; “Hey Mox’.”

“Hm?” Moxxie replied, his mouth still full of food.

“Can I ask you somethin’?”

After swallowing his bite, the Greed imp nodded; “Of course! I don’t see why not.”

“What’s, um… So what’s happenin’ between you and Loona? I mean, like, ya’ve been pretty adamant on being, well… I guess snappy at her, in a way.”

Millie’s heart sank a little when Moxxie let out a sigh, his tired eyes which held an emerging emotional fatigue strictly fixated on his wife. There was a moment of pause from the white-haired

imp who seemed to be thinking on what to say, before at last deciding to answer; “Millie, honey. You do realize who we’re talking about, right?”

“I do, and I know her well,” Millie nodded; “But what exactly is it with her which gets you all riled up and cocky towards her?”

“Uh, her attitude??” Moxxie replied, his tone abrupt like the answer was obvious; “Come on, dear, you know how much she slacks off — that, and the grief that she loves to give me. Let’s not forget the entire *week* we had to take off from work because *“yours truly”* decided to scurry off to some far-off land.”

Quick was Millie to assert her agreement; “Oh no, I get that! Trust me, Mox-bun, I was just as pissed off at her for pullin’ that off, too. But don’t you think that maybe we should, I dunno… give her a bit of leeway? I can tell it’s been consumin’ you.”

“The only thing that’s been consuming me is Loona’s insistence on being a layabout,” Moxxie laid down his bare frustration.

For the first time in what felt like ages, the imp found herself to be growing genuinely annoyed at her husband. Before she knew it, Millie found herself raising her voice against Moxxie; “But she really isn’t that bad!”

“And I say she is!” Moxxie barked right back with a firm stomp of his foot! Millie jumped in shock at the heavy-handed retort, and her heart skipped a beat. For a very brief and horrible moment in time, the countrywoman from Wrath didn’t recognize the man sitting across from her. It was as if a stranger had just broken into her home and decided to just casually eat breakfast with her, and Millie, having been brought under his deceptive spell, had made said breakfast for him. Reality felt like a fever-induced mirage in that bout of time, leaving her stunned. Moxxie’s mouth twitched with quickly waning irritability, his senses snapping back into place which in turn made him realize what he had just done. His eyes softened with regret as they refocused on Millie who was staring back in shock. Guilt overcame him, a heavy-hearted look appearing in his eyes; “I-I’m sorry, Millie, I… I-I didn’t mean to—... nevermind. I’m just tired, that’s all.”

At first Millie didn’t reply, not that she had chosen not to, the shock of his sudden outburst having left her slack-jawed and frozen in place. This paralysis ended with a blink and a small frown as she leant across the table and placed her hand on Moxxie’s own. “Why can’t you just tell me what’s upsettin’ you? I can tell somethin’ is.”

Moxxie was full to the brim with hesitancy; “There’s nothing wrong—”

“Moxxie, baby. Stop lyin’ to me,” Millie interrupted, her tone blunt but full of the milk of kindness; “Just tell me what’s going on.”

The most infuriating silence fell between husband and wife like a wall of the densest smog imaginable, accompanied by the putrid scent of baneful fumes. A heavy burden laid bare on Moxxie’s shoulders, Millie knew this as a fact, and desperate for satiation was her desire to know exactly what. Just as adamant as the Wrath native’s desire to know was her darling husband’s insistence to remain silent on the matter, keeping it secret and locked away lock-and-key like a prized yet burdensome possession. From the usually open and honest Moxxie, Millie had never seen this secrecy before, a sudden behavior which was in no stretch of the word ‘alien’ for him. But still he told her nothing. Why wouldn’t he just tell her? Millie had assumed for the longest time that their trust was staunchly mutual and unfaltering — “Perhaps”, one intrusive thought began to suggest; “she had been lying to herself.” “How stupid of her,” it taunted further. A small but prominent pit formed in her stomach, threatening to grow at any moment like a looming bottomless sinkhole. Luckily this thought died in an instant when Millie, being an optimist, remembered all the time that she had been with Moxxie. Their love was real, very real, and there was no chance in literal Hell that it would waver, for their mutual love was their unbreachable fortress.

Serving to nourish Millie’s sprouted seed of optimism like pure water was the answer Moxxie gave. His usual old self broke through the reclusive shell that had formed around him, a soft look and a kind smile sent Millie’s way as he said; “Millie, dearest. I promise you with all of my heart, I’m okay. Just a little tired, that’s all. But I’ll be fine. You know, if something was really bothering me, I would tell you in a heartbeat.”

Millie’s eyes softened into a kind look as she asked for reassurance; “You promise?”

“I promise,” Moxxie replied softly, taking the chance to lift up Millie’s little red hand and kiss it. This made her giggle, the warmth of Moxxie’s love radiating off him like a beacon of hope and optimism; a refuge which assured that everything would be alright in this world of despair and decay. Moxxie was Millie’s rock, and Millie was Moxxie’s strength; not even a brutish force of colossal magnitude could drive them apart.

All would be well. Everything, if they just stuck together through thick and thin, would be well — Millie made herself sure to remember this, lest she falter. She hoped that Moxxie remembered this, too.

“Hey there!” The cashier chimed politely; “What can I get for you?”

The next person in line, a certain hellhound, rocked up to the counter and looked up at the menu. “Hey! Yeah, I’ll just get a, uh… just a small skinny vanilla latte please, extra cinnamon,” Loona ordered without much hesitation. She had grown so used to ordering this exact same thing, that by this point she learnt to say it off by heart.

Quickly the cashier jotted the order down into the register, then looked back up to Loona to announce; “That’ll be four ninety-nine, thank you.”

“Wow, okay,” Loona replied as she pulled out her card; “Shit keeps going up, doesn’t it?”

“Mhm. Tell me about it…” the cashier agreed with regret, allowing for Loona to tap her card which processed the transaction in a near instant; “You need a receipt?”

“Nah, I’m good,” Loona replied with a held-up hand. At once she moved out of the way and waited for her order nearby, opting to press her back up against the wall with her arms folded.

And thus began the waiting game which was often associated with coffee shop cues. It was a slow and boring process to begin with, only made worse by the fact that Loona had forgotten to charge her phone the night before. This left it with no more than twenty percent battery life, so doom-scrolling until her latte was ready was way out of the question, which of course narked her. What else was there to do but wait, standing there in silence with nothing to do like a dolt. And so that is what Loona did, sighing as she watched the line before her grow shorter and shorter every half a minute or so. Mindlessly Loona began to take note of everyone in the eight-strong line, casually going over what they looked like out of boredom. Now ordering at the front of the line was an incubus with long hair in a tank top, and right behind him was funnily enough a succubus. Behind her was a shark demon dressed in a black hoodie, his patience stifled but waning like he was in a hurry. Behind him was another incubus, three imps in unison, a hellhound, and lastly another imp — but not just any imp.

Loona did a double-take on the last in line, realizing who exactly it was in an instant; “Millie?”

The lone imp's head shot up as her name was called, her eyes immediately coming into contact with the hellhound who had only just recognized her. Millie piped up, realizing who was in her vicinity; "Loona? Oh, Loona! Hey."

"What are you doing here?" Loona asked with her arms still folded.

"Was gonna ask you the same thing," Millie stated; "Skippin' work again?"

To this Loona rolled her eyes; "Ugh– no Millie, I'm not. After this I'm going straight to work. Besides, you can't talk. You're right here, aren't you?"

"Hm. You got a point there," Millie conceded, a smirk appearing on her face before receding quickly; "I'm not tryna give you a hard time, by the way. Just muckin' around."

"Don't worry about it," the hellhound said bluntly, before her mien became more moderately tempered; "So yeah, um… just here for coffee?"

"Yep."

"Oh. … So how's things between, uh… you and Moxxie. All good, or what?"

"Hope so. I sure do," Millie grumbled with a heavy almost clumsy-sounding exhale, shuffling herself forward a little bit as the line got shorter by one person; "He's still not tellin' me nothing."

"Still being secretive," Loona remarked solemnly, nodding her head in acknowledgement. She briefly turned her head towards the counter to see if her order was ready, only to find that it hadn't, before turning her attention back to her short red coworker; "Have you talked about it to him yet?"

"Yes. This morning," Millie at once confirmed; "But no, he's adamant that he's fine and whatnot. But I know he isn't." Solemnly the troubled matriarch tilted her eyes skywards in silent thought, wiping the corners of her eyes from either sweat or tears, Loona couldn't tell. Either way, she continued; "Do you have any idea how hard it is, to think he's hiding stuff from me?"

“I… I guess so,” Loona unsurely replied; “But look, Millie, I really don’t think he would willingly hide stuff from you. As I said before; I may not like the guy, but I know him somewhat. Maybe he doesn’t want to hurt you with whatever’s going on in his brain?”

Millie gave her head a meek shake, as the line once more shifted forward by one; “That makes it even worse.”

Loona was quick to realize the error of her wording, causing her to wince — “Poor choice of words,” she thought to herself. Loona scratched the side of her arm as she thought on what else to say; there was only so much comfort she could provide after all, and comforting people wasn’t necessarily one of the hellhound’s strong points. Just as she had somewhat of an idea, the cashier’s shrill voice called out her name; “Order for Loona, latte with extra cinnamon!”

“Hold that thought,” Loona told Millie before she went to collect her drink. With a little skip in her step, the lightly parched young woman grabbed her order with a polite *“thanks”*, before returning to her spot beside where Millie stood. “I’m back,” Loona announced, then got back to the point; “So anyway, yeah. Honestly, Millie, you wanna know something? Men can be weird and confusing sometimes. I’ve hung around and know quite a few of them to know that well enough.” After saying this, the hellhound took a light sip of her cinnamon-flavored latte — it tasted perfect, creamy and refreshing.

At this point of view Millie seemed conflicted, though she did appear to think on it as if she considered it a good point. She shook her head after a while and asked; “But why? Why do people have to be so hard to figure out?”

“Beats me,” Loona shrugged and sipped another bit of her latte; “It’s taken me ages to get used to Blitz, and even now I still don’t understand him. People in general are just… I dunno, they’re all on different levels on the *“Fucked-Up Scale”*, depending on who you mean.”

“Hah! Well look at you, all full of wisdom,” Millie chortled in her drawl, complete with a small toothy smirk; “Honestly I like this side of ya, wish it came out more.”

“Hmph. Don’t remember asking for praises,” Loona said with indifference, moving alongside Millie as the line grew shorter — there were now only two people left to go until the imp could finally order.

Chatter between the two stagnated a little bit, before trundling on with a digression. “So about Blitz. This might seem a lil’ personal, but do ya see him as your dad or what?” Millie asked with a bit of caution.

Loona froze and thought about the question, then answered with uncertainty; “Whether I like it or not, yeah. I’m forced to accept that he is anyway, so yanno, what the heck. He’s the only dad I’ve ever really had, so… I-I’m grateful for that. Just don’t tell Moxxie I said that, please.”

The hellhound’s coworker smirked, a look of mischief appearing in her big yellow eyes; “Don’t worry, ah won’t~”

“You better,” Loona mumbled under her breath, giving the imp a small but noticeable death glare as a fair enough warning in case she considered pushing her luck. Spirits between the two remained unimpeded however, the afterthought of a warning remaining as just that.

Soon after Millie realized just how much they had gotten off track, acting on undoing this subversion by asking; “Do you think Moxxie will be okay?”

“You’re asking me? I don’t know, I’m not in his head,” Loona conceded, while at the same time noticing that Millie was now no more than one person away from the counter; she had to think fast. And so the hellhound said; “But if you want my advice, or what little I have, I think… um… Well, if this shit goes on for any longer, or if it gets worse, just say what you think straight-up. Just say; *“Moxxie, babe”*, or whatever-the-fuck sweet shit you call him; *“Quit being all secretive with me.”* Don’t beat around the bush, you know? That’s the literal worst thing you can do.”

Nothing more than a gentle nod came as a response, Millie’s eyes wandering off before the customer in front of her left the counter. “Wait outside, I’ll join ya in a minute,” Millie said in earnest, then turned around to order what she so appetized.

Without another word spoken, Loona left the “CaffVixen Café” to wait outside, with her latte still warm and enticing in her soft grip. So began the hellhound’s wait which she knew wouldn’t be too long at all, the remedy for a bit of a wait being a quick check of her phone, the temptation of which was now too much to withstand. The “liberation” of looking at her phone screen was to Loona the same release a full-time smoker felt when lighting another cigarette; an addiction in a very literal sense, and one which she couldn’t seem to help. Just like that the safe monotony of doom-scrolling jutted out to Loona’s eyes as her thumb helped navigate through sinstagram post after sinstagram post. As the posts flew by after one particular scroll, Loona thought she spotted a post from Verosika herself, but one which she couldn't find when she actively tried to find it again. After a

few sips of cinnamon latte later, Millie came through the entrance doors to link back up with her associate.

“Huh. That didn’t take long,” Loona noted to Millie, looking down at the takeaway cup in the imp’s hand.

“Meh. They were fast that time, I suppose,” Millie guessed before taking a sip; “Mm! Dang, this stuff’s good.”

“You can say that again. What did you order?” Loona asked out of pure curiosity, beginning to walk alongside Millie for the walk down to work.

“Nuthin’ much. Just got one of them cinnamon lattes they make,” Millie informed and swished the cup casually.

“So you ask me for advice, and copy my order?” Loona let out a short scoff at this, albeit with a smile; “Well shit, if I didn’t know any better, I’d figure you’re copying me at this point.”

“Copy you?? Ha! Like Hell I would,” Millie clapped back with a scoff of her own, but all was said without malice. After they crossed the street in unison, and headed down a street which shaved off the travel time by around ten minutes or less, Millie asked; “Didja hear about the guy we’re killin’ today?”

Loona sipped yet another portion of latte, which was still pleasantly warm, before asking; “Which one?”

“Big fucker, connected with the Mafia! Apparently he’s a big, mean bastard.”

“You have any idea how little that narrows it down?” The hellhound remarked, rolling her eyes a little.

“Sure do,” Millie confirmed in a sing-song voice, continuing to skip alongside her taller partner-in-assassinations; “But! I reckon it’s gonna be fun. We might need ya for this one.”

“Oh joy..” Loona remarked with a hint of sarcasm, but deep inside she desired a little bit of field action — it had been a hot minute without some. A little bit of time out-and-about wouldn’t hurt, now would it? The receptionist made a mental note to herself to check this aforementioned so-dubbed “Big fucker’s” case file once she had arrived at work. Even without the name, Loona had somewhat of a clue who exactly Millie was referring to.

“Oh, and Loona.”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for hearin’ me out.”

Loona huffed and let off a smile; “Nah, don’t mention it,” she said, a hint of gratefulness for Millie’s gratitude simmering inside of her.

Contritus

‘Oskar Nykiel’ — this was the name of I.M.P’s next most unfortunate target, destined via mere pen and paper for a whole wide world of misery and hurt. The directions given specifically for this man were simple; *“Cause as much agony for him as you can. Torture him if you’re so inclined,”* as orally and authorly directed by the Sinner who had come into the headquarters about this ‘Oskar’. From the sounds of things, according to the file which Loona skimmed over before leaving for this job, the Sinner who had come in had some deep boiling hatred for this now ‘dead man walking’, though the client refused to elaborate. However I.M.P wasn’t here to ask questions, not that they ever did; time was money, and the only way to make money in Blitz’s little business was to ‘collect heads’, so to speak.

This particular hit job, like the numerous others which they had done before, of course had risk factors which could spell their demise, rapid or otherwise, if certain errors are made. Luckily for them, this one had the advantage of isolation, the address they had been given seemed to lead them to some property in the middle of nowhere, the only form of civilization being a little town called “Jezow” a good five-to-ten miles away. Apparently he had taken up a job as a local farmer, perhaps to leave his criminal connections undercover through the means of an unsuspecting, mundane business of his own. As unsuspecting as it was, however, on word of mouth the Sinner told them to remain vigilant for any tricks or ambushes, as apparently according to I.M.P’s latest client, this ‘Oskar’ was sly, conniving, and above all unpredictable. Still, it wasn’t nothing that certain team of four couldn’t handle, at least that’s what they all figured with varying degrees of caution.

Blitz landed face-first in a damp field of wheat as he clumsily passed through the portal, immediately getting a mouthful of worm-infested soil which stank of earth and fresh rain. “*PLAH!!* Eugh, fuck!” Blitz exclaimed with his teeth caked with soil, then letting out a tad-bit dramatic dry heave.

Millie, Moxxie, and Loona’s arrivals were far more dignified, getting into their defensive positions as they looked through the vast yellow field of wheat they stood within. It was sundown by the time the four-strong group arrived, the pleasant warm hue of the late afternoon sun setting to the west washing the plains of wheat with even more tranceful yellow. The horizon too was blessed with a most gracious sight for sore eyes, a palette of yellows, oranges, and darkened blue, painted along the sky in a pure glorious masterpiece — if only Hell had its own equivalent. Unfortunately Loona wasn’t there to admire nature, her focus paid fully on getting this hit over and done with, a bottle of some of the ‘good stuff’ waiting for her back at home; a little self-indulgent reward for a hard day’s work.

“So what’s this place look like?” Millie asked while trying her best to scan the horizon, her search hindered by the height of the wheat.

Loona, who had the advantage of height by two extra feet, was too scouting the distance around them as she filled in; “It’s a big house in the middle of a field, I think. Can’t miss it.”

“Any other hints that Sinner gave?” Millie pushed.

“Pretty sure he also said something about a stone barn next to it. Keep a lookout for that,” Loona directed without stopping her search, the effort of which so far yielded no results.

“Goddammit, there’s nothing but this yellow shit for miles,” Blitz complained with a groan, trying to see over the sea of crops obscuring his vision. For intelligence, he turned to his daughter; “You see anything up there, Loonie?”

“Not yet…” Loona relayed while continuing to look, having done a near full one-eighty with nothing else to be seen except for more wheat, isolated rows of trees, and a break in the field in the form of a small river. Hope in this mission being a quick in-and-out was soon to be fading, only for Loona to freeze as she spotted something in the distance; there, nestled underneath the shadow of a massive tree, was a stone barn. It wasn’t an out of the ordinary structure, just a grimey old barn with its roof tiles missing in places, exposing bits of the weathered rafters that had triumphantly stood the test of time. Accompanying the barn which had seen many years, hiding behind its silhouette in a shy manner, was sure enough a house, almost as old as the forward stone structure it hid behind. It was two storeys in height, made of painted white brick with a red-tiled roof, the interior lights shining through the windows a clear indication that somebody was home — a highly unlucky somebody, unbeknownst to their approaching early fate. With the target pinpointed, Loona pointed towards it and said; “There. Found our guy, right there.”

“Where?? I can’t see shit!” Blitz whined, trying to peer over the horizon. Loona rolled her eyes and picked the leader up by under his armpits, allowing him to at last see the lonesome property. The lead imp’s eyes dilated like a cat as they locked onto the point of interest, the tip of his tail wagging excitedly like a rattlesnake and a devious grin creeping along his lips. “Oohoho, this is going to be great,” Blitz hissed with excitement, landing back on his feet after escaping Loona’s grip; “Okay, let’s go! M&M, Loonie, follow my lead!”

“Uh, no, we’re not,” Loona begged to differ, planting a firm foot in front of Blitz’s path; “The client said this guy’s tricky. We’re not running head-first into a trap. Besides, you can’t even see over the goddamn wheat! I’ll lead.”

“I dunno ‘bout you two, but I’m with Loona on this,” Millie seconded to the hellhound’s surprise.

Moxxie squinted at his wife, bewildered; “Since when are you with Loona on anything?”

“Since now, Mox’,” Millie asserted. It was from this short and sharp string of words did Loona appreciate the unusual tension between them.

Blitz was none the wiser to the scene going on in front of him, his mind solely focused on one thing. He schemed out loud; “Mmh! Can’t wait to gut this sick fuck like a fish, and hang him up on a hook from his ass. I can smell the agony already!”

At this Loona shook her head; “Holy shit, Blitz… Alright, come on! Follow me,” she directed all three imps, at last leading them through the wheat directly towards their destination. From the looks of things there was only so much daylight left, the sun continuing to fall and capitulate to the veil of night. This motivated Loona to get this job over and done with, so as not to have to wade through the evening darkness in conjunction with the copious thicket of crops. As the armed and dangerous group of four waded through, Loona overheard the sound of conversation going on from behind her, the culprits being who else but the married couple. It was a little indiscernible at first, the sound of collective crunching footsteps against dirt drowning it out, but from what little Loona could make out, it sounded to be about her specifically. Of course this beckoned for her attention, a cry which she promptly answered; “There a problem back there?”

“Oh, no-no! None at all,” Moxxie piped up, his response reeking from a pinch of attitude; “Just wondering if you know what you’re doing.”’

“Moxxie. C’mon, stop,” Millie beckoned in a hushed tone, trying to de-escalate. Moxxie seemed to ignore it.

Loona was in no mood to deal with Moxxie’s latest flare-up of antics, instead rebuking; “If I didn’t, I would put your sorry ass in charge of this entire operation. You’d probably lead us all off a cliff if you got the chance.”

“Ha! Probably,” Blitz interjected, an interjection which wasn’t warranted nor wanted.

“You say that as if you’ve led anything of this magnitude before,” Moxxie said without any loss of his earlier snark.

“Yeah, well neither have you!” Loona clapped back, continuing to tear a path through the wheatfield; “Listen, Moxxie. You want to go your own way on this? Go right the fuck ahead! Be the hero you want to be, nobody’s stopping you. Just don’t come crying for us when you eventually get your head jammed up your ass.”

Moxxie looked just about ready to explode; “You know wh—”

“Moxxie!” Millie interrupted forcefully, her voice raised into a scolding growl. She said to her husband, a sharp pointed finger mere inches from him, a clear and firm; “Stop.”

This seemed to do the trick, as not another word on the petty back-and-forth was paid on Moxxie’s side, and in turn neither from the defensive hellhound’s. Loona glanced behind her towards Millie, the both of them locking eyes for a split second before the leader turned back around, finding that they had made significant progress towards the secluded farmhouse and stable. Crunch time was nearly upon the four, so they needed to keep their wits about; this meant an abstinence from infighting, as there would be enough of it here. At least this is what Loona assumed, knowing their track record on the “success-to-chaos” scale. For her concentration’s sake, the de-facto leader ignored these assumptions, wanting nothing more than to have all this go exactly as planned; no amount of predictions would decide the outcome, if anything it would hinder success.

The point of interest was fast approaching and so was the edge of the field of wheat, the only thing standing between the assassins and their target being a barren narrow road and a fence guarding the property. Soon as Loona broke through the thicket and out into the clearing, she leant down in a crevice which divided the field from the unmarked loose stone road. Blitz slid down into the same crevice soon after, then followed Millie and Moxxie in that order who spread out evenly, making themselves as low to the ground as possible. Now that everyone was in place, the stage was set for the ‘fun’ to begin. Blitz used the sights of his rifle to scan the house, carefully inspecting every window for any signs of life, a life which would soon be snuffed out near effortlessly.

Loona did her own analysis of the building with her sight alone, focusing on the road in case someone passed by. She whispered to Blitz; “Anyone in there?”

“Mm… Nah. Not from what I can see,” Blitz murmured while watching the second storey windows; “The lights are on, but I can’t see anyone. Fucker’s being illusive…”

“Can't say I blame him, with his record,” Loona remarked; “Hey, you know what? We’ll make it easier for us. I’ll go right up to the windows and I’ll peer through, maybe even try something to lure him out.”

“Now that… that’s not a bad idea, pumpkin,” Blitz complimented, affectionately patting his scheming daughter on the head; “Your dad’s proud of ya! See, Moxxie? Loonie here *is* capable at this!”

“What are you— *Ngah!* Quit it!” Loona protested and nudged the imp’s hand right off her head. She let out a preparatory exhale; “Alright, here I go. Be ready,” the hellhound ordered, then with one last check to see if the path was clear dashed across the road, sneaking with swift and light footing right up to the house.

With quick maneuver Loona slid up to the exterior wall and crouched underneath the windowsill, catching her breath as she prepared herself to peer inside. It was in that very spot, in the midst of the “danger zone”, did she begin to feel her nerves experience a flicker of uneasiness. While it was only small and could be easily ignored, the way it kicked in the second she got back-first against the house made her doubtful about this whole operation, like it was a turning point which didn’t bode well. Loona shrugged it off, despite the feeling, and looked up at the window from where she sat, coming face-to-face with the overhanging rust red windowsill and contemplated her next move. Out of a minute sense of uncertainty, Loona looked back towards Blitz for a moment, to which the imp grinned and gave a double thumbs up — an invitation to ‘go ahead’. And that’s exactly what the hellhound did.

Slowly Loona raised herself into a crouched position and peered straight through the window. She was met with a mundane scene; a kitchen in the far end of the room and a cloth-covered dining table closest to the window, a small vase which held a eye-catching bouquet of white Lilies. In the kitchen sat an open steel saucepan resting atop the burner, wisps of hot steam swirling up and around it which signified that something had been made — dinner from the looks of things, in addition to the plate and set of cutlery placed next to it on the counter. To the far right of the room was an open doorway, through which Loona spotted a staircase leading upwards to the second floor, the unseen warm light on top of the staircase illuminating as far down as the ground floor. As the intruder watched the light intently, she noticed it darken momentarily, indicating that something had moved underneath the source, this assumption backed up by the figure now moving down the stairs.

Swiftly Loona ducked back down to hide, hearing the muffled sound of the stairs creaking under the occupant’s weight, only stopping once it sounded like he had reached the ground floor. Loona peered back over discreetly, once more locking her eyes onto the target, who was now staring back up the stairs as if he was making sure of something. He was frozen in place, deeply attentive at

whatever lay beyond the top step, whatever it was seeming to warrant a great deal of acknowledgment. The hidden observer watched as the black-shirted man put a hesitant foot back on the first step as though he contemplated going back up, but froze for another contemplative moment before finally hobbling into the kitchen. An odd pattern of behavior to be certain, and one which beckoned for Loona to investigate once the blood and gore-filled hurly-burly had been done. For now, before any bold moves could be made, the hellhound continued to watch, the balding brown-haired man turning his back towards the window to tend to the saucepan. He passed a framed photograph which hung at eye-level on the wall, the picture containing the very same man and what had to be his wife on their wedding day. They looked happy, content, even jovial. Loona could only imagine the flurry of emotions on that day. But this was a condemned man, a 'dead man walking' — he would never know happiness or peace again, not that he did in the first place. As Loona continued to watch, she saw the man turned to his left and began muttering something to himself, his lips moving no more than an inch, and his eyes turned spacey. The observant hellhound furrowed her brow in confusion; what was he doing?

"See anything yet?" Blitz asked in a whisper, his pistol at the ready.

Loona jumped in fright and nearly let out a yelp, seeing the life flash before her eyes; "Holy fuck, Blitz!" She fumed at him in a whispered shout, her heart racing at a million beats per minute; "I told you to stay put, what the hell are you doing?!"

"Meh, couldn't wait any longer," Blitz confessed, his tongue poking out between his teeth like a mischievous dope; "Besides, want to see if you're okay."

The hellhound let out a deep sigh, running a hand down her face and across her muzzle; "I'm fine. Anyway, I found the guy, he's in the kitchen."

"Really? Where??" The imp asked a little bit too excitedly, pressing his face against the window.

"Wh— Get down, you idiot!" Loona snarled and forcefully pulled down her father. She scolded him; "What are you trying to do, get us noticed??"

"What's he going to do, shoot us? He doesn't even have a gun on him."

"We don't know that!" Loona half-shouted with both hands planted on Blitz's shoulders to keep him restrained, a scene more appropriate for a mother trying to control her disobedient and unruly

child. The ‘brains’ of the operation said calmly; “We’ll get to killing this guy soon, okay? Just be patient, and do *not* do anything stupid… unless I say so.”

Surprisingly Blitz complied as Loona peered back through the window, again finding the occupant tending to the kitchen — he hadn’t moved. There was slight and precise movement from his right hand, within it was a small measuring cup topped with an unknown white powdery substance. He tapped the utensil softly against a tin can which sat beneath his hand, allowing some of the loose powder to fall into it, then carefully poured the leveled substance into the saucepan.

Spying alongside Loona was Blitz who was this time far more careful with his investigation. He squinted at what the target was doing and asked; “What’s he doing?”

“No clue,” Loona replied quietly, watching the mundane scene unfold just as intently, if not more.

The pair fell silent again, watching the process begin for a second and final time, then followed by the ‘cook’ grabbing a wooden spoon and using it to stir the simmering contents. Stillness was an alien concept to Blitz, as evident by his patience running out with an impatient grunt; “Ugh! So what are we doing here, Loonie? Do we watch this live meth lab cooking show with dollar-store Walter White, or do we make bread today?”

At last the moment of truth had arrived. The curtains were about to draw close on the build-up, and entering stage left was the climax called ‘dirty work’ which heralded death and destruction, a scene of utter bloodlust well and truly about to begin. Everything was primed and ready, all that was left was for the deadman’s switch to be released, and who else called the shots this time but Loona. She sat there, still staring over the windowsill at the target, this ‘Oskar Nykiel’, evaluating her options. And so, without further ado, she gave her verdict; “Do it.”

The biggest, most evil grin of pure malice spread across Blitz’s face as excitement took over him, the imp jumping up onto his feet with rifle drawn. He ran right up to the door and kicked it in with force, the sound of the door busting open shattering the lock as well as the peace — ***BAMM!!***

“KNOCK-KNOCK, DICK CHEESE!!” Blitz screamed as he barged right through the wide open doorway! Loona stayed put to watch the chaos from outside for the time being, watching as the target reeled in terror from at first the noise, then the little red terror armed with a weapon charging right at him. Hard was the tackle that Blitz dealt upon the human, causing him to fall hard on his back with a painful ***“THUD!!”*** as he bellowed and writhed in horror.

This was Loona's cue to join in, unfurling herself and breaking into a sprint like an olympian on steroids, right through the busted front door. If the noise was already loud enough from the outside, it was surely deafening inside, the sound of intense wrestling and cries from both the target and his assailant echoing throughout the walls. Loona skidded to a halt inside the room where she found Blitz and the target, finding them both fighting for their literal lives, small splatters of each other's blood already peppering the floor.

The target of the day certainly wasn't going down without a fight, screaming his lungs out; "SPADAJ! ZEJSC! B-BOZE, BOZE POMOZ MI PROSZE!!"

Blitz struck the man right across the head without an inkling of mercy; "Sorry asshole, can't understand you! Hope you can understand me, 'cause—*GAH!! NFF!!* C-'cause your ass is in for a world of h-hurt," the imp taunted while taking a few hits himself. He snapped his head to the new arrival, his left eye already blackened from a closed fist; "Dammit Loona, help me out here!"

"Alright already, calm down!" Loona shouted then sprung into action, prying the still resisting target and dealing a huge right hook against his stomach! This left the human weak who crumpled instantly, allowing for the hellhound to slam him up against the wall and ask demaningly; "You're Oskar, right??"

The man didn't seem to understand, much less understand why two baffling creatures were in his house. He sputtered fearfully; "C-Co?! Czym jestes?! Czym je—GAH!!"

For a second time Loona's fist collided hard with the target's abdomen, leaving him crying out with confusion, fear, and pain. She asked again, this time with more force and a furious snarl; "Are you Oskar Nykiel, yes or no?! Answer me, you creepy balding prick!!"

"Aww c'mon now Loona, without us??" Millie piped up as she sprinted into the kitchen, having just arrived with Moxxie right behind her.

"He was winning over Blitz, I couldn't just stand there," Loona explained while continuing to pin her captive with her bare hands; "You got that note with you?"

"What note?"

“The one the client gave us before he left,” Loona replied; “Said he wanted us to ask a few questions before we kill this dork.”

It didn’t take long for Millie to realize; “Uhh—Oh, the envelope! Yeah, I got it. Is that what’s in it, questions?”

“Apparently,” Loona said as she received the letter from Millie’s hands, tearing it open with her teeth to have it ready to be read. But she wasn’t done with her round of torture yet, in fact she was just getting started. With brute strength Loona threw the helpless man over the dining table, the vaseful of Lilies falling to the floor with him in a loud and painful shatter!

Terrified, the victim cowered before the four ruthless figures approaching him; “Laska! Zlituj sie, prosze! Litosci nie! Nie!!” He continued to wail with his bloodied and bruised face, his hands shielding his face in a pitiful attempt to defend himself. Mercy would not come to him anytime soon, that much was for certain.

“Someone hold him down!” Loona growled with urgency as she stamped her foot against his leg to hinder his escape. Having realized the futility of trying to escape, the man sat there and cowered away, his eyes wide with physical paralyzing fear, a gash on his forehead trickling down across his brow. He continued to plead for mercy. Despite his frequent cries, Loona ignored them, instead focusing her attention on the slip of paper she had just pulled out from the envelope. She tried to read it — to no avail. What she found on the slip, rather than intelligible writing, was a series of indistinguishable scribbles, the only thing readable being the haphazardly written title: ***‘Questions’***.

Loona stared at the paper in her hands, dumbfounded; “I can’t read any of this! Dammit, I knew that guy was a drunken idiot!” Out of frustration and anger she scrunched the slip into a rough ball and threw it at her prey, the projectile landing in his battered lap.

With terror tattooed into his unbruised eye, ‘Oskar’ looked down at the paper ball now in his possession. Suddenly his good eye widened in realization as he muttered; “Wrobel… W-Wrobel, niemozliwe, on nie zyje! C-Czy to ten, ktory was wszystkitch przyslal, Wrobel?!”

At first Loona hadn’t the faintest idea what he was talking about, until she looked down at the now scrunched-up piece of paper. There, just poking out of the bundle of mess now sprinkled with a droplet of blood, were two single words — ***‘Signed: Wrobel’***. A so-far routine job had just gotten a little complicated, prompting Loona to turn around and ask; “Does anyone know what the hell this guy is saying??”

“I-I think I do,” Moxxie piped up, stepping forward to come closer to the man who reeled back in terror of the imp’s presence; who could blame him? The white-haired imp then asked; “Polish? Do you speak Polish?”

“C-Co? Polska?? Oczywiscie, ze jestem kurwa Polakiem!” The captive bellowed furiously in his already terrified state, his hands trembling like he had an otherworldly fever.

Loona looked on in disbelief; “Seriously? You knew what this guy was saying all along?!”

“Hey, I only just realized!” Moxxie exclaimed in his defense, before turning back to ‘Oskar’ and spoke in the victim’s tongue; “Wrobel? Znasz Wrobel?”

“T-Tak! Tak, ja robie!” The man spluttered, coughing profusely before wheezing; “P-prze… Przetrzymywal mnie jako okup przez… p-piec lat!”

Whatever the assaulted man had just confessed made Moxxie freeze and raise his brow with confusion, like he felt something didn’t add up. His silence was enough reason for Loona to speak up; “Well come on, Moxxie, what did he say? Can’t keep his ass alive forever!”

“He was… he was held for ransom,” the translator filled in; “By this *‘Wrobel’* guy.”

That inexplicable bad feeling from earlier had returned to Loona the moment Moxxie informed her of this ‘Oskar’s’ confession, rattling her from somewhere inside. She however spited it by kicking hard right into the man’s ribs, causing him to bellow out once again. Loona scoffed; “So what if he’s in ransom to him? That’s what happens when you join criminals. He should’ve expected this to happen, not cry about it like a pussy! Isn’t that right, Oskar?”

“HAD NO CHOICE!!” ‘Oskar’ cried out suddenly, his tears mixing with the hot red blood coating his face. This took everyone in the room by surprise, including Loona who stared at him in shock. “H-Had no.. choice…” the Pole croaked again; “Needed… money. Had nothing… Did it for her.”

Blitz crouched down to his eye level and sneered with deep contempt; “OH-HO, yeah?? For who, you sad prick?!”

Life has a peculiar way of responding to questions, often giving answers to inquiries which were perhaps never meant to be answered. Often it is said that there are no coincidences, that everything that has occurred and will occur has a deeper meaning, for one person or the next. Perhaps things occur because of convenience, of fate, or for the purpose of sending a message. Whatever the reason may be, things happen constantly. Such was the case of the 'here' and 'now', for when as soon as the room grew quiet, and the assassins awaited an answer from the downed and beaten man, then in place of a verbal reply came a sound. It was a faint and muffled sound, but one which couldn't be ignored — high-pitched, throaty, incessant, desperate… haunting. It came from upstairs.

Out of all the people who heard it, Loona noticed it the most, her ears turned towards where the source may be as her eyes lost malice and hatred. A pit formed in the hellhound's stomach. All that Loona remembered from that point onward was her body acting on its own, as if she had lost control. Away went her foot from the man's leg as she slowly approached the stairs, her eyes focusing up the flight.

"Nie! *NIE!!* Zostaw ja w spokoju!!" The man cried desperately, briefly drowning out the sound.

Loona didn't listen. She made it to the bottom step and began to climb.

"What are you— Hey! Loona! Loona, what the hell are you doing?!" Blitz then shouted; "Get yourself back here right now, missie!!"

The only acknowledgment that Loona gave was a brief look back into the kitchen, her disbelieving gaze focused on one thing only; the tin. It had a label on it: ***"Formula Dla Dziecka"***. The pit in the hellhound's stomach grew larger as the muffled, ear-splitting sound grew louder the further she climbed the stairs. Directly across from where the stairway ended was a closed door, a soft yellow light glowing through the clearing between the door itself and the floor. Automatically Loona's body approached the room, her hand gripping the knob which was strangely electric to the touch, before pushing the door open, revealing what lay inside. Immediately the sound grew several decibels louder as Loona peered inside, her eyes closing in on the cradle which lay to the east-side of the room.

In the cradle was a baby, crying its little lungs out with the force of a thousand lions, though she was feeble and weak against the presence which now stood in the doorway. On the wailing infant's face was a small oxygen mask, the tube attached to a machine which helped her stay alive. The child was upset — no… the child was distraught, and terrified. She knew something was wrong. She was helpless, desperately crying out for attention, safety, and the love of her father. Loona's

heart sank to the lowest it had ever been as she began to feel so incredibly uneasy on her feet, her eyes so impossibly wide and hyper-focused on the little life lying in her sanctuary. Then Loona looked up, lifting her eyes to the wall behind the cradle to find… it. ‘It’ was an icon of a man, but not just any “man”, staring right back at her with eyes which were emotionless, yet judging. Millions of emotions — guilt, sorrow, fear, disillusionment, isolation, anger, self-hatred — ran through Loona’s head all at once at the impossible speed of light, as her eyes became misty, and she became lightheaded.

And thus, as her eyesight failed, and the world became dark around her, and her body began to feel numb and weak, Loona stared uncompromisingly at the *‘Nazareth Man’* on the wall.

Damned

January, 1919 — Archangelsk. Encounter Plus Five Days.

A man-sized trolley covered by a sheet was wheeled through the halls of the hospital, a doctor with a beard, his clean-shaven assistant, a British Sergeant, and two armed riflemen of the 'Beloye Dvizheniye' escorting it to a private room. The snowstorm outside rattled the windows with its howling winds after a period of two days with calm weather; this gave them a brief window of opportunity to search for the missing platoon, the results of which were tragic. Yes, the Expeditionary Forces had found the platoon, albeit what was left of them, with three missing like they had just ceased to exist, vanished without a trace. This was unlike the search for the lost French detachment which was meant to relieve the outpost, the traces of whom were never found — not even a footprint. But who could've found them in that dense, thick snow, with another inch or more of that white hell falling every hour? Sadly it was an impossible, futile effort to say the very least, with another round of sons lost to time, not because of gunfire, but rather death by nature herself. Their true fates, however, were up to the most imaginative of guesses in the most paranoid of minds.

Not a word was spoken in that musk-scented hallway as the entourage marched down it, their eyes fixated on a door at the very end of the corridor. Acting as an extra aroma to the dull and dreary atmosphere was the tangy, putrid metallic smell, coming from where else but from underneath the stained white sheet. Awaiting their arrival by the far-end room's doorway were another two armed counter-revolutionary Russian guards, both standing on either side of the entrance with utmost stillness. The British Sergeant took the lead as the group-of-five approached, facing the two armed guards on standby directly, with his passport in hand and opened. With a swift stop, the enlisted man greeted; "Morning. I'm here to see Captain Boswell."

"Kapitan Bosvell…" the guard to the left who sported a curled mustache repeated, inspecting the passport that had just been handed to him. His thick-lined brow furrowed with a low grumble as he looked back up; "You here for an appointment, Sergeant?"

"Yes, as was established," the Sergeant replied quickly, then fixed up his khaki service tunic; "Last minute."

The guard seemed skeptical; "Are you sure?"

"Don't play clueless with me, Sir, you know exactly why I'm here," the Sergeant demanded with a frustrated flare to his tone; "I promise you this is urgent. Do not waste my time."

The two guards on standby exchanged glances at each other for a moment, before at last the left-side guard gave in. He pivoted to the door and knocked three times, calling out a name; “Kapitan Bosvell, Sergeant Pike is here.”

“Let him in,” a gruff voice from beyond the door ordered, his own tone demanding no nonsense. The order was promptly obeyed, the guard to the right opening the door to allow the new arrivals in.

In a single-file line the entourage walked in, both guards doing the sign of the cross the moment the trolley passed them by, before closing the door behind them. ‘Sergeant Pike’ stood at attention in the hospital ward converted into a makeshift office, standing in the center of the room facing a varnished teak desk with a chair. Standing in front of the desk with both hands clasped behind his back was the Sergeant’s superior, ‘Captain Boswell’, his khaki uniform and visor cap immaculately maintained despite the savage situation he found himself in. The Captain extinguished the remnants of his cigar and rid his mustache from leftover tobacco. He asked; “So how was it, did we find them?”

“Aye Sir, we found them,” Sergeant Pike confirmed.

“And are they alive?”

“No, Sir,” the enlisted man announced solemnly; “They’re not alive.”

“I see.”

“It was a rather gruesome scene when my men got there. We searched the house, what was left of it. Found the remnants of bodies, and only one somewhat intact one. We got him right here.” The Sergeant gestured grimly to the shrouded trolley, the white sheet well and truly stained with seeping viscera and blood.

Captain Boswell seemed to morbidly marvel at the trolley, taking note of just how small it was; “Is there any more of him?”

Stiffly the British Sergeant shook his head; “Just this.”

At this very moment did the superior take off his cap, his expression full of grim sorrow; “My God. … Well go on then. Let us see him.”

Reluctancy shone in the eyes of Sergeant Pike, but at the end of the day, an order was an order. He turned to the Doctor behind him and gave a permissible nod, and at once the physician grabbed hold of the shroud and revealed the carnage that lay underneath. The sight which lay sprawled out and limp before the Captain made him pause in shock at the brutality; what was once a perfectly fit and healthy soldier was nothing more than a face mangled beyond recognition, a pair of flayed arms, and the remnants of an upper torso, his ribs exposed and shattered in the most painful way possible. In all of their years in service to God, King, and Country, neither Captain Boswell nor Sergeant Pike had ever seen something like this before, not even on the Western Front in the now-since-ended Great War. “Man in Heaven…” Captain Boswell muttered, averting his eyes from the disfigured corpse and back up to Sergeant Pike; “Do we know the man’s name?”

“No, Sir,” the Sergeant said regretfully, taking off his own peaked cap in a correction of his etiquette; “We couldn’t tell.”

To show the dead man the respect which he rightly deserved, the superior approached his body and lay a trembling hand on his blood and snow-sodden shoulder, patting it gently a few times before letting go. Being a seasoned soldier of the King meant that he was seldom a stranger to death; he had seen many deaths, from the young and old, and in far reaching places, such as in the hills of the Boer to the vast fields of Flanders. Death was an old foe to him, a fiend which haunted his life like an obsessive stalker of dubious origin and unwanted presence. On many a day Captain William Hughes Boswell gambled with that ever-so grim specter named ‘Death’, as if it was an old timeless rivalry destined by nature to forever be so. One would always get the better of the other, and on this sad occasion, the victorious Sir Death had gotten the better of the knightly and bold Sir Boswell of Great Britain. This was a defeat that the seasoned Captain needed to take in his stride, though on this occasion he found it difficult to.

At last, after contemplating over the mangled unsightly corpse, Captain Boswell asked the inevitable question; “What could have done this?”

“We can’t tell, Sir,” the field Doctor spoke up for the first time; “My guess is a bear, but even then it would have to be one gigantic bear to cause this much damage.”

Out of all the possible explanations, this one perhaps was the most sane of them all in an otherwise insane situation. Though it was far-fetched by any other metric, the pensive and disturbed Captain Boswell had no other choice than to consider it with serious thought, allowing himself to pace in a small circle to help him do so. He wanted to believe that there was some worldly explanation to the horribly mutilated cadaver which lay limp before him — such was the Doctor's best guess — but a part of him wouldn't allow him to believe it. From all of the fronts which the superior Officer had faced and fought in, this current adventure of being a Captain in task of an Expeditionary Force company was his most bizarre stint yet.

This wasn't the only mind-boggling report to have come Captain Boswell's way either, as just the previous week his inferior comrade-in-arms, one First Lieutenant Benedict Nicholson, had relayed to him a troubling report from a garrison stationed just outside of Archangelsk. According to the report, the young Private Oliver Bennett had apparently seen a large shape weaving between the pine trees, underneath the cover of the oppressive deep winter's fog. This was enough to scare him, as evident by the existence of said report, so much so that he hollered for someone to come quick and see what he was seeing. Quickly coming to Private Bennett's aid was Private Wright, who upon rushing to his fellow compatriot peered into the depths of the forest with his rifle at the ready, only to find nothing of the hulking, dark specter. It was painfully clear to Private Wright that Private Bennett was on the verge of being inconsolable, his nerves that night well and truly shot from what he had seen.

From the old report from the week prior, and the tragic spectacle lying before him in a state of morbid disgrace, Captain Boswell came to an undesired conclusion; something was going on. This wasn't just some ordinary 'something' either; this was something otherworldly, and to be given the respect of fear it so forcefully demanded. With his visor cap still in the grip of his limp hand, the British Captain said solemnly; "Right. Take him to the autopsy ward, we'll give him a burial. And take a photograph as well, this needs to be documented."

"Yes Sir," Sergeant Pike obliged, gesturing for the Doctor and his assistant to obey the order.

Just as he was about to leave with the physician and the guards which had accompanied him, the superior called out; "Stay here, Sergeant. I must speak to you."

"Of course, Sir," Pike abided without skipping a beat, at once turning around to rejoin his superior. What would've been his means to exit was shut behind him by the guards outside, leaving both Sergeant and Captain to their privacy.

The silence which quickly permeated through the cold, musky air of that makeshift office was deafening and so uncomfortably heavy. Relief only came when, to the gratitude of Sergeant Pike,

Captain Boswell asked; “What am I to do with my men, Sergeant Pike? Why should I leave them to the mercy of whatever… *brute* is lurking out there any longer?”

“My thoughts exactly, Sir,” Sergeant Pike answered in agreement; “If we had it our way, I would advise that we leave at once, let the French reinforce where they need. Besides, they have already offered to take over until we can get a proper flow of supplies in, they know our situation.”

“With the ice coverage out there, I’m not sure if that’s possible,” the British Captain sighed; “Not only that, but we have those bastard Reds further south picking fights with our other companies. If it’s not the weather or that mysterious thing fighting against us, it’s Lenin’s brutes.” Boswell paused and looked glassy-eyed out the window, watching the snowstorm outside blow colder than if hell had frozen over. In fact, with the harsh winds blowing like they had never done before, he was reminded of something; “Mid-January, last year,” the Captain mumbled, his eyes getting lost in all of that falling thick blanket of whiteness; “Where were you around then, Sergeant?”

After being slightly caught off guard, the so-far mostly attentive Sergeant Pike stated; “I-I was stationed in Beersheba, with the Australian Garrison. I was tasked with managing the Ottoman Prisoners of War, alongside Sergeant Major, uh… Simmons or Saunders, if I remember his name correctly.”

“At least you were there,” the Captain said flatly while nodding his head, still gazing out the frosted window; “At least you weren’t freezing your buttocks off in the height of winter, near some blasted French city called Reims. I was stationed on the northmost outskirts of some trench, tasked with commanding a subunit of men. Most of them were Northern English, Scots, Ulstermen, even some Australians allocated to us. They were good men, excellent warriors in battle, and had the vigor which could scare the wits out of the Boche.” A small smile spread underneath the seasoned soldier’s thick mustache, a certain level of pride radiating from it. In spite of all the hardships that being an enlisted man had brought him, this Captain was proud of his position, and consequently the men that he had both by his side and under his command. “I remember,” Captain Boswell continued; “That we had under our authority a bunch of Germans which we captured earlier that week, about ten of them. A bunch of hungry and tired young men they were, one of them barely even a man, but a boy. Immediately he caught my attention, just by the look in his eyes alone, the same look you get when you’re hit by the force of a barrage. I asked him, in German, what was wrong with him. He said to me that he had been seeing something, out in the winter’s fog two days prior. According to this boy, he said that it stalked him and particularly him, after it had collected the corpses of his comrades out in no-man’s land. He said it looked like it was harvesting them, like a farmer in the middle of spring. Now of course, Sergeant, I took all of this as symptoms of a mere boy seeing the brutality of war, and thus having his mind run amok because of what he had seen. But now? … Now, my good man, I am not so certain of my conviction.”

The wind let out a ferocious howl from outside in place of Captain Boswell’s voice as it fell silent, as there was nothing more to say. Both men knew, albeit without open admittance, that something

was going on out there in that vast North Russian wilderness, but they were afraid to find out what, let alone speculate. At last the Captain turned from the window and back towards his lower-ranked compatriot, saying in an all-serious manner; “We must survive this winter, Sergeant Pike, and I know we will. But I need you with me on one thing; we must leave this place, get our men to safety.”

“I agree,” Sergeant Pike affirmed with a confident stiff nod; “But how do you suppose we arrange that?”

“I’ll speak to my superiors,” Boswell replied; “For now, good Sir, keep watch of our men. Make sure they’re okay.”

“Right you are,” the Sergeant obeyed the direction, at once leaving the room as soon as he was dismissed. A battle of an alternative nature seemed to be well and truly in its motions.

“Loona? Helloo, Hell to Loona, are you there?”

“Dammit Moxxie, it’s not working! Try harder!”

“I’m already trying, sir! I’m pretty sure she’s still knocked out.”

“No… Is she… s-she— Wh—? Nono, wait, she’s waking up! Holy shit, she’s alive! She’s actually fucking alive!”

Heavy and throbbing was the severe headache Loona woke up with, every part of her body stiff and sore like they had deadweights bound tightly to them. Blurry was the hellhound’s usually twenty-twenty vision as her eyelids creeped open in an unsteady flutter, the dull familiar ceiling of the I.M.P headquarters being the first thing she saw. Loona found herself sprawled out lengthways across the torn company couch, her head sunken into the soft armrest while her feet dangled limply off the opposite end, her arms meanwhile sprawled out across both the backrest and onto the floor. After figuring out exactly where she was with a fair amount of effort, Loona let out a slurred, almost drunken-sounding groan; *“Mmrrghhh… G-Grddahmn…”* she gurgled incoherently.

Through her regained sense of hearing Loona heard Blitz bombard her with questions; “Loonie-pie! Don’t worry, babygirl, daddy’s here for you! H-How do you feel? Cold, sick, lightheaded?? Just tell me, and I’ll help you, I promise!”

“…I feel like… l-like shit,” Loona told her overly concerned father, then placed a weak hand upon her forehead and over her dreary sand-filled eyes; “*Wh…*w-what the fuck happened..?”

“We heard you pass out upstairs,” Moxxie said; “It took us a little while to get you out then bring you here.”

“…Right...” Loona wheezed and attempted to pick herself up to no avail; for the time being her body chose to stay fixated to the couch, like she was a part of it.

“And *I* of course did most of the work taking you down — thanks for nothing, Moxxie,” Blitz briefly scorned; “Have to say, I didn’t expect a wailing baby to make you faint.”

Suddenly Loona’s eyes shot wide open as she took a sharp breath; the memory of what happened suddenly came flooding back to her. Alarm bells went off in her head as she felt herself become nauseous, giving her enough motivation to throw herself off the couch and stumble desperately into the bathroom. Loona threw her head over the toilet bowl and instantly dry heaved, feeling the onset of vomit rise up into her throat, only to stop before it saw the light of day. Tears pricked up in the sides of her eyes as Loona threatened to throw up a second time, the only thing managing to come up was a thick blob of saliva which she messily spat out. After making completely sure that she wasn’t going to spill her breakfast, Loona called out with a croak; “Wh-What did you do to him..? Did you *-urk-* …kill him?”

Blitz, who had rushed over just outside the bathroom door, didn't quite get what his daughter was asking; "What do you me—"

"You know exactly what I mean, you idiot!" Loona threw herself around and hissed violently, sending her fist flying into the wall which left a huge, gaping hole; "The target! Did you kill the target or not?!"

"How could've we?!" Blitz shouted back; "We were busy trying to get you outta there! We needed all hands on deck to haul you out, and now we're five-hundred dollars short on pay!"

Astonished anger flared up in Loona's eyes; "THE MONEY?!" She boomed from the bathroom; "Is that seriously what you're worried about right now, the motherfucking money?! Not the fact that we nearly turned a goddamn baby — a *BABY,* Blitz — into a fucking orphan?!"

"Since when have you been concerned about the target's lives, Loona?" Moxxie pressed with genuine surprise and confusion.

"SINCE NOW, you little red asshole!!" Loona barked with wide, furious eyes, her throat becoming dry from all the boisterous screaming. Regardless she continued to scream; "What about you, Moxxie? Are you saying you would've killed that guy, then leave his fucking *baby* to die?! You'd never understand what it's like being an orphan!"

"I'll have you know I would've—… I would've, uhm… hm." Moxxie was left stunted by the accusation, unsure of what to say in rebuke, if he even had one to begin with. "B-But even then, Loona, the man was guilty of some serious shit! You read the file on him, didn't you?"

"He was set up!! Don't you get it?! You were the one translating for him, you heard what he said! Nnngah— I can't believe you! I can't believe ANY OF YOU, y-you sick bastards!!" Nobody dared say a word in the aftermath of Loona's outburst as she breathed heavily, the waking headache she had suffered had since given way to explosive anger as if it was the cure. On her unsteady footing Loona shuffled queasily out of the bathroom, using the nearby wall to maintain her balance. She looked bitterly at all of her coworkers like they were the ones which had made her an orphan, a primal look of sheer animosity and contempt plastered on her face. The reaction from the three imps varied; Moxxie was perplexed, Millie was about ready to defend herself if need be, and Blitz looked to be in a limbo between being agitated, horrified, and genuinely heartbroken. Never in recent memory had he seen his very own hellhound daughter lash out in this way, using such

damning words in the height of it all. He felt that, despite her obvious flared up state, that Loona meant every single word of it; that Blitz could tell, for as clear as day was the authentically judgmental look in her eyes.

Having seen that she had gotten her message across, Loona's bared teeth disappeared behind a close-lipped sneer, straightening herself up from her slouched posture before murmuring; "I'm going for a smoke, downstairs. … Don't bother me." Without another word, Loona left.

The hallway sounded echoey and felt distant as Loona trod slowly down it, her entire surroundings felt like an entire world away. None of it felt real, as if it was all an elaborate lie, built upon lies, and maintained by even more lies. Her whole life leading up to this very moment felt like a paper-thin facade, a part of her wondering if she even truly knew people who she held close. Millie, Moxxie, Blitz; were they nothing more than monsters who cared more about their back pocket over the lives which they gladly took? Did they even care whether or not their "collected heads" were actually guilty of the charges put against their names? These were the questions which swirled around in Loona's head as she stepped into the elevator, watching the doors close before her before it began the descent to the ground floor. Within the deepest chasm of the isolated hellhound's mind came a voice; *"They don't know you, Loona. They never have."*

"No. They don't," Loona muttered with a dismal yet angered look in her eyes which boiled with frustration; "They never have, probably never will. Who the fuck knows anymore, 'cause I sure don't."

"What if they begin to question you?" The inner machinations of her troubled mindset nagged again.

"So what?" Loona replied in a mere mumble; "I've got my reasons."

Further and further Loona descended inside the elevator, until at last the descending room chimed a singular dull tone, the indicator heralding that the lone occupant had arrived on the ground floor. The pair of metallic doors rumbled open to reveal the vacant lobby, the only sign of life being a lone imp strolling down the sidewalk just outside the entrance, going about her day. To the passer-by, the solitary young adult watching her from inside I.M.P headquarters was nothing more than dust blowing in the wind; something to pay no attention towards. But Loona didn't blame the distant imp, after all who was she to her? With a fresh cigarette now dangling from her lips, Loona wandered outside and sat down by the side of the curb with a rough landing, making sure she was completely alone before lighting the small white roll of tobacco. As the pensive, avoidant Loona drew a shallow pull of her cigarette and blew out the smoke, she lifted her eyes up into the red pride sky, watching the dark clouds drift above her in their sluggish nature, their destination and goal nonexistent.

The boiling anger in Loona's hot-red eyes began to simmer down and give way to a look of numbness. She wondered, with the cigarette smoke stinging her nostrils, if one day she could reach the level of tranquility and ease as those clouds. She also wondered if one day that would be true, and not some fanciful dream used as a means of escapism, a mental alleviant materialized in the mind without actually hopelessly crying out for help. Loona thought about becoming one with the stars, getting lost in the inky blackness for even just a mere moment in time, whatever the means of doing so may be. The thought was pretty, but she doubted that it would be possible — only a dark, chasmic abyss void of stars awaited her, full of the cries of agony of many a soul she had cut down. Everyone she knew would forget about her, as would greater society who probably didn't even know she existed; just another gone hellhound in a sea of billions, if not trillions like her. Loona's face was bleak as she blew out the smoke and tapped away the spent ash into the gutter, then again took another slow drag.

Then came a voice, this time not in her head. Rather, it came from her right, distant but approaching. The voice was wildly incoherent and slurred, sounding more akin to the mindless cries of some brain-dead animal rather than anything with actual intelligence. As it got closer it became too bothersome to ignore, with Loona cocking her head to see whom the voice belonged to. Who she saw sent a flare of animosity up her spine. Shuffling down the sidewalk and threatening to trip over himself was a portly sinner, his round dark red face unshaven and his teeth horrifically discolored. The buttons on his stained second-hand Mammon branded shirt held on for dear life, as his alcohol-inflicted pot gut threatened to burst right through it, his cuffed brown caliper pants in a similar harrowing situation. One brown horn poking through the messed brown hair on his head seemed to have been sliced clean off while the other appeared fine, albeit chipped in some noticeable places.

Dread arose within Loona as she recognized who it was, trying her best to contain her disdain towards him by simply ignoring him; she turned back around and continued to smoke. She heard his ramblings grow louder as he got closer; "…Ehnded up like nothing but.. sh-shit on their boot, didn't ah? …Rraargh, Kurwa… Nah nah, why does it maht-mahtter anywho..? Zhey meant nohsing to me, I mean nohsing to zhem. But come on, I employed zhem! Zhen Zhey vhent and shot me..? Eugh, who carezsh anymore. I'm down here, they're… they're up zhere.."

Loona practically forced herself to remain seated, trying her utmost best to keep herself from jumping up and slamming his head into the pavement. She was doing a good enough job so far, so maybe he wouldn't notice her, especially in his drunken state.

But fate had other ideas; "You! … Yesh, yew. I-I've sheen you befoah, yes..?"

The hellhound continued to ignore him. Casually she blew another round of smoke, tapped away the ash, then took another drag.

“Hey. I’m talking to you, woman,” the sinner slurred again; “Hey. … Hey!”

“Yeah?” Loona responded with a deadpan stare, her voice emotionless yet impatient.

“Have I… have I seen you before, or… or noht?”

Loona let off a slow shrug; “I don’t know. Have you?” She took another cigarette pull before saying with the smoke pouring from her mouth; “There’s a lot of people who look like me.”

“Nononono, ah… ah don’t think sho,” the intoxicated sinner asserted, his voice gurgly as though his throat was full of fluid; “You’re that… yesh, you’re that desk girl from up in zhis building, aren’t you?”

This time Loona refused to give the sinner the courtesy of an answer, instead spitting into the filth-ridden gutter she sat beside. It was a good enough alternative to instead spitting in the face of the living filth looking behind her, the urge to wring his neck until it snapped growing by the second.

“Did you do… zhe thing..?” The sinner asked with an almost overly dramatic pause.

Loona let out a sniff, acting clueless; “What thing.”

“The thing!” The alcohol-scented sinner exclaimed, sounding awfully close to letting out a nauseating belch; “The thing with… Oskar. Did you kill zhe balding horseshit or not?”

“Can’t say I know anyone by that name, dude,” Loona replied with a light growl, inconspicuously flexing her fingers which let out a foreboding crackle; “Again, pretty sure you’ve got the wrong hellhound. Now fuck off, I’m trying to smoke here.”

It was at this dismissive response did the drunkard let out a disconcerting mixture of a growl, a mumble, and a cough all at the same time. “*Aaarraaaaugh..* Y-You’ve got a lotta nerve talkin’ to me like that, yew… yew curbside, moody little whore.”

"…What did you just call me?"

"Oughh, so you heard that? See, I called you a little, curbside, moody little who—"

THWACK!! — A clenched fist went flying straight into the sinner's chest which sent him toppling backwards, his back hitting the pavement with a dull fat-ridden thud! Loona staggered back onto her feet with both sets of claws unsheathed, ready to give a beatdown — this fight would be very personal. She yelled; "Get up, you drunk fatty! Come on, give me your best shot, I fucking DARE you!!"

In much pain the sinner stumbled back up onto his unsteady feet, glaring at Loona with unfocused contempt and anger; "Bet," he growled angrily! Just as he was about to make his move, the click of a pistol's hammer interrupted the fight, then a familiar voice; "Nuh-uh, not on my fucking watch!"

Loona's eyes darted behind the sinner, finding none other but a certain imp with his pistol drawn to her opponent's head; "Blitz?"

"Hey, sweetie," Blitz greeted briefly, then pressed the sinner with a drastic change in manner; "Just what do you think you're planning, huh? You gonna fight my daughter? I don't know about you, you drunken piglet, but I'm pretty sure that's a reeeeally bad idea."

"And whooo do yew zshthink yoo arr?" The Sinner gurgled, his chest thumping with the force from Loona's careening fist.

"I'm her father, asshole!" Blitz screamed right into the assailant's ear, causing him to reel in pain; "Now if you don't get the fuck out of here right now, I swear I'm going to blow a glory hole right through your big fat head!"

Tensions were at an all-time high outside of I.M.P headquarters, and a handful of passers-by had now become a distant audience watching the stand-off with morbid curiosity. Their attention was in vain however, as if by some miracle the heavily intoxicated instigator realized he was outnumbered two-to-one, and thus staggered off, mumbling in disgrace. With the provocateur now moving on, so too did those who were waiting for a spectacular scuffle.

After letting her guard down with an unsteady exhale, Loona said to Blitz; “I thought I told you not to bother me.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t leave you down here by yourself,” Blitz explained his reasoning as he holstered his pistol underneath his coat; “You okay?”

“Does it look like I am?” Loona huffed, sitting sat back down on the curbside; “Leave me alone, please. Go back upstairs.”

“Uh, no??” Blitz said on the contrary; “No sorry, I don’t think I’m gonna do that. Not with you. What if that spunk stain comes back?”

“You got a point there,” Loona conceded. She ran her fingers up her face and through her hair; “Fuck, I’m such a mess…”

One thing that Blitz was definitely not known for was being sensitive or compassionate, as evident by his debatably ‘legal’ profession. But this was his daughter, and for the five-or-so years he had been her father, she had always come first. Today was no exception — or perhaps, in a certain sense, it was. In a heartbeat Blitz sat down beside his daughter, his demeanor softened as he reached eye-level with Loona. He asked him; “Why are you a mess, what makes you think that?”

“What doesn’t make me think that,” Loona croaked pensively with her palms cupping her chin, her cigarette still in her fingers remarkably untouched by the brief fight; “Just look at me, I always have been broken,” she emphasized with a point to her somber-looking face; “But now I feel even more so.”

“But why—”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?” Loona asked incredulously, not waiting for the imp to finish speaking; “Blitz, there was a kid up there, a baby! If we had killed that guy, that would’ve made her an orphan. Do you seriously think I, an *orphan*, would wanna wish that on anyone else?” With her free hand, Loona jabbed her fingers into her chest; “I know what it’s like. It’s not fun.”

Blitz was left unsure of what to say, and consequently remained silent. He watched as Loona took yet another brief drag of her cigarette, the wisps of smoke escaping through her lips as she gently

blew it out. Eventually Blitz figured that his silence couldn't be sustained for much longer, and so he said; "W-Well how was I supposed to know there was gonna be some babbling kid involved? We don't know who's gonna come through the door and ask us to kill who-knows-who."

While taking a break from smoking, the hellhound shook her head. "That's the problem, isn't it," Loona muttered; "We don't know. Maybe we should start asking questions from now on, 'cause who knows when the next time there'll be another sicko, asking us to kill some poor fucking dad under ransom. I dunno, Blitz, I'm just—… I almost killed a kid's dad. … I couldn't live with myself if I did."

This sent alarm bells ringing in the single father's mind; "Hey. Hey, Loona, no. Come on," Blitz soothed; "Enough with that talk. It's… dammit. If this is anyone's fault, it's mine. I made you come, I accepted the five-hundred-dollar deposit he gave us, and I didn't realize there was a kid. I'm… Loona, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I put that on you."

Loona couldn't help but lightly scoff, not out of scorn, rather confusion; "What are you apologizing for? You didn't know."

"Well I run this whole shitshow, that kill would've been on me," Blitz affirmed; "But… Loonie-pie, I really have to ask. What's gotten into you lately? You've never been like this before. Has someone been influencing you?"

A shake of her head was Loona's response; "Ugh. No, dad, nobody's been influencing me, whispering in my ear, or whatever-the-hell you're thinking." For a split second she took one last pull of her cigarette and put it out on the floor, crushing the minuscule smoldering remains underneath her foot. With the last round of smoke billowing from between her teeth like a fire was burning behind them, Loona stated; "I don't know why I've got to tell a grown adult this, but get this. Sometimes there comes a point in people's lives where, after some thought, you start seeing things differently. You know how things that seemed normal to you at first suddenly become gross, fucked up, and so on? I think that's what's happening to me. I just… I… I-I dunno, dad, I feel I'm at the end of my rope with this gig."

"What are you tryna say, you wanna quit?" Blitz pressed, trying to be on the same page.

Looking back up into the sky while lying on her back, the hellhound sighed; "Maybe? Fuck if I know. I might need to sleep on it." Loona noticed that within Blitz's eyes was what looked to be a tinge of faint disappointment, though it also looked like a look of fatherly concern. Disappointment or not, she didn't care; she knew what she felt and what she saw, and there was no way she was

going to forget it anytime soon. What she saw that day was too much to just set aside and go about her usual routine; she felt that change in her personal ‘Status Quo’ was due.

As Loona gazed thoughtfully up into the afternoon sky, and her thoughts whirling around with indecision, she heard Blitz say in a calm, maternal way; “Well geez, I… okay, well… Loonie, listen to me. I-I might not know what’s going around in that head of yours, and I might never fully know. But whatever you want to do, no matter what decision you come to, I as your father will always have your back. Don’t go thinking I won’t, even for a second. Okay?”

Silently Loona nodded her head, her folded-back ears brushing against the pavement. On Blitz’s face crept a reassuring smile as he gently pat her forearm; “Your dad will always love you, pumpkin. That’ll never change, not in a million years.”

“…Thanks,” Loona said softly, then did the unexpected; she inched her hand over to meet Blitz’s, and gave it a gentle squeeze. Though he was taken by surprise, he didn’t hesitate to hold his grown daughter’s hand, knowing that in some way or another it would bring her comfort. Loona, in turn, did indeed feel comforted, though she was still unsure of herself. A part of her wondered if she ever would be sure.

Blitz sat hunched over on the couch with a bowl of cereal, watching a movie which he didn’t know the name of. It was an old movie of sorts, one which was black and white, and obviously originated from the human world. He could tell that it did, judging by the two humans on screen, one old with a white beard, and the other young with facial hair limited to his cheeks and chin. Their backs were pressed up against one another and they sat amongst the trees, the young lad listening to the man several years his senior who was speaking — but no sound played from the flatscreen television’s speaker. *“Must’ve been one of those stupid silent films”* was the thought which crossed Blitz’s mind as he read the subtitles. The imp’s interest was caught by what the yellow transcription read, finding that it resonated with him in a strange, eerily familiar way: ***“Everything is an eternal circle, and it repeats and repeats itself.”*** Blitz remained leant forward with his eyes glued to the screen, watching as the subtitles disappeared and the scene readied itself to progress… but then it paused, suddenly rewinded, and started from where it began. The transcript had reappeared; ***“Everything is an eternal circle, and it repeats and repeats itself.”***

“Satan dammit…” Blitz grumbled to himself, setting aside his bowl of midnight cereal and getting up to tend to the faulty film. He bent down in front of the screen and pressed the button to eject the DVD, preparing himself to look for any scratches — nothing came out. Blitz scrunched his brow and looked back up at the television, still finding the movie playing and repeating for its third or fourth time, the truly unique subtitles still glaring right back at him. This confused the imp; he never watched broadcast television on account of it all being the same old recycled slop aimed at

the dullard masses, so what made him watch it now? And what possessed them to start broadcasting this human world crap, anyway? That's when Blitz realized; he didn't remember beginning to watch the film, nor did he remember pouring himself his midnight cereal snack. It was like this moment had always been, materialized just like that with no rhyme or reason.

Then came a sound from the door — ***KNOCK-KNOCK-KNOCK!!*** — it was loud, almost reverberative, and made Blitz nearly smash his horns into the television screen. He spun around to gawk at the door, his fright quickly turning to anger after he had noticed the time: ***'12:01'***. Who in their right mind would knock so loud this late, let alone at *his* door? Without another moment spared for thought, Blitz marched up to the front door, just about ready to give a good old-fashioned beatdown to whoever dared disturb him. The door swung open violently due to Blitz's wrathful might, the imp just about ready to breathe fire at whoever stood outside, but just as he opened his great big mouth, he froze. Instead of whoever he expected, four tall figures made of pure pitch blackness stood before him, all looking to be wearing a full-bodied black cloak.

The resident responded in the only way he could at that time; "Hah, wow! The fuck's all this, some kinda cult meeting? Sorry, but you've got the wrong address. Now get lost, I'm tryna watch something."

But the shrouded figures didn't move, not heeding Blitz's order.

"Uh, did you pricks hear what I said," Blitz said, sounding more agitated; "I said go, get outta here!"

Still, no movement. Not even a shift.

Blitz began to suspect that something was up, prompting him to ask cautiously; "What do you want?" The frontmost figure outreached his cloaked arm in the first sign of movement, his outstretched hand pointing behind the imp, and towards a specific spot. Blitz turned around and to his surprise found *her* standing in front of her room. Blitz was more than confused; "Loonie?"

"I have to go, dad," Loona told him, looking and sounding like she was in a trance.

"W-What are you talking about," Blitz stammered.

“I have to go,” the hellhound repeated; “It’s my time. I have to go.” Slowly she crept towards the doorway, her footing light and slow like a ghost.

“Loonie?? Sweetheart, where are you—” Blitz watched as Loona walked right past him, joining the dark ghostly specters. “Loona? Loona, where are you going?? Loona! D-Don’t leave me!” Alas she didn’t listen, who joined the small congregation who surrounded her like an all-engulfing abyss. Something huge and self-sustaining, that which motivated him to struggle on, died inside Blitz who watched this unfold, sending him into an inconsolable frenzy, trying to punch and claw at the kidnappers which had no effect on them; “Let her go! I said let her go, you fucking cultist sickos! That’s *my* daughter! THAT’S *MY* BABY!!”

“RAAGH!! Huff, hu-huff, huff…” Blitz shot up from the couch in a sweat, the horse-decorated blanket which covered him sodden with his panicked perspiration. Frantically he looked around the room, finding that he was alone — he had been asleep. He was about to jump up from the couch and see if Loona hadn’t been stolen from him, but the deep snoring which emanated from her room proved to the frightened imp that she was safe and sound. Blitz let out an exhausted sigh of relief and threw his head back into the pillow, finally allowing himself to calm down. Unfocused were his eyes as they gazed up at the ceiling, allowing himself to wonder in this much needed time of calmness as to where in the hell that dream — no, where that nightmare came from.

Then came a soft sound — ***Ping!***

Instantly Blitz looked over to his phone on the floor, finding that his screen had lit up, and a message was displayed. At first glance the half-asleep assassin assumed that it was nothing more than a scam message, so when he picked it up and found that the text was from Stolas, his eyes widened in surprise. Carefully Blitz read the short and straight-to-the-point message; ***“See me at my palace, six sharp. I must speak to you, it's urgent.”***

A sinking feeling emerged in Blitz’s stomach.

Behind The Stage Curtain

Alone was the succubus celebrity who sat in the waiting room, her ripped jean-clad legs crossed over one another, and the heel of her black fur boot tapping gently against her lower leg. Her arms were folded in a reserved fashion, her beige fluffy jacket giving her warm comfort which in turn soothed her calm, yet ailed mind. It had been a rough month-or-so since Verosika's life-or-death encounter with that intrusive Sinner, his gaunt, rotting cadaver face etched into her mind like a physical trauma which was difficult to heal. Ever since the encounter, and the abrupt cancellation of both her Hell-wide and human world-wide tours, she had been hospitalized, examined, prescribed all sorts of drugs, and on top of all this was given a weekly appointment with a psychologist lasting until the end of the month. This was her last official appointment, of course done in a closed-off clinic to avoid the intrusion of paparazzis who no doubt wanted to air her every move to the public, her security team led especially by Vortex going to great lengths to ensure that none of those "pervert ratbags" — as Verosika herself disdainfully called them — could get inside.

In her self-evaluation of her mental health since the incident, the lonesome celebrity couldn't help but think that, in some way or another, her mental health had improved, in no small thanks to the psychologist she had chosen; a short, fluffy, pudgy white hellhound by the name of "Pennie". For the duration of Verosika's time with her, 'Pennie' had been soothing and sweet to her patient from day one, running through with her some techniques which, to her patient's surprise, had a positive and productive effect on her. As a matter of fact, Verosika had grown a liking to the stocky little hellhound, and this time she actively looked forward to seeing her again. One of this 'Pennie's' unique tactics with seeing eye-to-eye with Verosika was telling her a little bit about her personal life; the fact that she was a single mother with a baby no more than six months old. As told to the succubus from none other than herself, Pennie's mother was the one looking after her infant son when she was away at work, a thought which Verosika thought was rather sweet. It all sounded like a lot of responsibility, and one which Verosika thought that she couldn't handle, not in a million years.

The wait suddenly ended when the door to "Doctor Pennie's" office swung gently open, and shuffling out the room to greet her patient was none other than Pennie herself. A big welcoming smile spread across her fluffy face; "Verosikaaa, hello!" She beamed brightly, extending her hand out for a greeting.

Verosika got up from her seat and shook the hellhound's small hand; "Heey, girl! Wow, you're looking so fucking good today. *Oop*— now look at that cute, sexy little skirt of yours!"

"Awwwe, is it really? You're such a sweetheart," Pennie blushed a little, swaying her maroon knee-length skirt around to show it off, her brown wolf cut swaying also; "I've been told red goes so well for me."

“And it does! Keep rocking it, girl, by all means,” Verosika beamed right back, feeling as though she was just talking to an old, dear friend. “Really can’t believe this is the last time I’ll be seeing you. Like holy shit, time flies!”

“It does, it really does,” Pennie heartily agreed as she led Verosika into her office, escorting her to a pair of fluffy lounge chairs facing each other in the rough middle of the room.

Just as she got to her spot in the room, the succubus contributed more to their pre-session catch up; “So how’s your little one, is he all good?” Verosika asked out of sheer courtesy, sitting down in her designated lounge chair

“Awe, he is, he’s going sooo well!” Pennie chimed with stars in her eyes as she too sat down; “He’s been going to this little playgroup in Wrath. I’m told by Margerie that he loves it there, but he has a tendency to nibble!”

“Now isn’t that sweet,” Verosika cooed with nothing but sincerity, feeling the baby fever practically radiating off the short fluffy hellhound.

Pennie nodded her head; “I think so!” Without another moment’s spent, she moved onwards with their session together, pulling up a little book she kept beside her and opened it up. She lifted her eyes back up at Verosika and asked; “So how have you been so far this week, how’ve you been feeling?”

“I’d say I’ve been good,” Verosika gladly replied; “Little hiccups here and there, especially if I’m alone for a longer period of time. But so far, yeah, I’d say I’ve gotten better.”

“That’s so good to hear!” Pennie quickly jotted this down in her book using a pen she had in hand; “And how have been your sleep patterns?”

“Oh, you know, what you’d expect from a showgirl like me,” Verosika lightly joked with a grin; “But no, it’s been alright! Been getting about six to seven hours of sleep, I’d say.”

“Good, very good,” the fluffy hellhound replied without a change in her cheerful tone, also writing this down. “And how do you say the quality of your sleep? We spoke last time about some dreams which you were having.”

“O-Oh! Yeah, those,” Verosika promptly remembered, laughing a little to alleviate the anxiety she had about them; “They’ve pretty much all fizzled out, thank fuck. Can’t remember when the last one was really, maybe… *fff-five*... yeah, five days ago if I had to guess? I-I don’t much like thinking about them, it makes my anxiety go through the roof.”

“Hey now, don’t fret. It’s understandable,” Pennie soothed, making her voice as gentle for Verosika as possible. As per her duty as a professional therapist, the hellhound was unhesitant to confess; “I remember the nights immediately after I had my boy, Jakey. All hours of the night I was having these awful night terrors, near made me have a goddamn heart attack! Was only when my boy started bawling for his momma did I finally wake up. I recovered quickly from them, but hot damn, they were horrifying for as long as they lasted!”

“You poor girl, I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” Verosika expressed her sympathies.

“Oh, no-no! I’m perfectly fine, dearest,” Pennie quickly assured; “After all it’s been my baby boy who has kept me sane, if I have to be honest.”

Verosika snorted and threatened to laugh behind her covered mouth; “*Snrk!* That’s gotta be the first time I’ve ever heard someone say that. Baby fever’s bitten you good!”

“I’d say! Baby fever’s a tough sonuvabitch to break out of,” Pennie conceded with a feminine flick of her hand. A thought crossed her mind which sent her mouth agape, before she remarked; “Uhm… t-this might sound a little bit strange to ask, but have you ever considered motherhood?”

The thought frightened Verosika; “Muh-Motherhood?? Nonono, oh *hell* no! Not for me! I-I don’t think I’d be a good mom at all!”

“Why nooot? I think you’d be great at it,” Pennie enthusiastically encouraged.

But Verosika was staunch in her judgment; “Maybe, if I wasn’t busy performing,” she said with a heavy, almost hopeless and yearning sigh; “Have you *seen* the way some kids who grow up in

celebrity households turn out like? Ain't no way I'd put a kid through all that, fuck no! That'd be cruel of me."

At this Pennie realized where her patient was coming from, stifling her insistence for the idea as she realized what the succubus was saying was true. "That's show business, I suppose," Pennie recognized; "Cruel to anyone involved in it. Not even the children are spared."

"Oh—well, I wouldn't put it *that* depressingly," Verosika smirked; "It's just challenging tryna juggle your personal life with thousands of freaks sending you creepy fan mail everyday. Just yesterday we had some jackass send me a box of his *hair* for me to keep!"

Pennie's mouth hung wide open; "Ewwww, you're kidding," she exclaimed with her nose scrunched in disgust.

To the hellhound's disbelief, Verosika shook her head vigorously, her therapist's reaction making her laugh; "No, I'm not! Now you know I love you, Pennie, but I am one-hundred-percent certain that if we switched places, you wouldn't last an hour."

"Not gonna challenge you on that one. Ugh, sweet cheeses, you poor thing," Pennie remarked with a hand on her head in revolted, wholehearted agreement. So far the final scheduled session had been full of gossip, however that wasn't what they were here to do, and the psychologist being paid a healthy sum knew this. As much as the fluffy hellhound was willing to continue chattering cordially like this, her more professional instinct told her to move swiftly onwards. After putting on her reading glasses which were nestled up atop her head, Pennie went on to ask; "I must ask as well, Verosika, if I may. I'm only gonna ask this because I'm legally required to according to your medical records, but how have you been going with your, well… drinking habits. A-Again, dearie, this isn't to antagonize you! It's just to make sure you're okay."

"Oh, no-no, I get that! Pennie, honey, please don't stress, I get it," Verosika wasted no time to assure tenfold. She answered the inquiry; "So far so good, that's all I have to say. Not drinking as often, and when I do, I usually just go for red wine. Apparently it was the Beelzejuice which was the problem, who woulda thought."

"The Beelzejuice?" Pennie's attention had automatically honed in on this unsuspecting yet ear-catching detail; "As in, from the Queen Bee herself?"

Verosika nodded; “You mean Beelzebub? Yeah! It’s like a monthly ration kinda arrangement that she gives out, because yanno, I’m a big name in the industry and all that. According to the doctor who I saw about my whole alcoholism thing, he said that there was something “strange” about specifically my share of the stuff. The Strangest part about it is that he wouldn’t, or maybe couldn’t, elaborate. All he said was that I needed to get off it “right now”, so I could have a shot at getting onto the straight and narrow.”

Pennie was left curiously intrigued; “Wow. That’s, uh, interesting,” she couldn't help but note aloud; “Did he ever end up telling you *why* it was strange?”

“Nope,” Verosika quickly replied, a look of after-the-fact confusion appearing in her eyes as she began thinking about it; “He kinda just sent me right into rehab, didn’t even follow up. Then a few weeks later, he went into retirement, at least that’s what I heard.” The more that the famed succubus thought about her previous doctor’s retirement, the more she came to realize that the circumstances were a little bit strange. Much like Doctor Pennie now sitting across from her, ‘Doctor Contifue’ had an open and personal approach when interacting with his now ex-patient, going out of his way to be as transparent with her as possible. But then again, the aging incubus did have some health problems of his own, which perhaps must’ve led to his sudden retirement from the medical field. He did mention something to her about going into retirement, Verosika recalled silently. But herself and her incubus doctor were close, so why didn’t he check up on her?

In a change of focus, Pennie had become a little bit of a detective into the case which was completely novel to her; “Have you spoken to the Queen Bee herself about this,” she queried with growing interest.

“Can’t say I have, no,” Verosika admitted; “Besides, I feel that would break the poor girl’s heart if I did. What am I supposed to say, that her stuff was a detriment to me?”

“If it’s becoming a detriment to your health,” Pennie said; “Then you should prioritize yourself, and yourself only. That’s for everything, really, it’s no different than looking after your mental health. Both physical and mental health work in tandem with each other; if one isn’t doing well, so will the other, and vice versa.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” the succubus admitted after paying it thought; “Guess I’m too much of a people pleaser for my own good.”

“Oh no, I wouldn’t say that, dear. You’re just thoughtful about others point of views, and that’s a good thing,” the therapist gently commended; “But! It can also be a double-edged sword. Really,

it's a matter of knowing how to balance between taking both yourself into consideration, and others."

Heavy and coarse was the gruff exhale Verosika drew as she heard this; "Yet another thing I have to work on," she regretfully conceded, her plate already full of a list of things she needed to improve on. The phrase; *"No rest for the wicked"*, flashed in her mind, finding it to be a fitting play of words reserved just for her, an inherited struggle not necessarily agreed upon. It was merely meant to be, the succubus had long considered, like a birthright swallowed whole in the temptations of all that had consciousness. Verosika was a vessel for the sin of lust, this fact she knew by default and accepted wholeheartedly, for it was all she knew according to her blood. For her not to fulfill her succubus ways was like commanding a toad to cease immersing itself in moisture; not only would it go against its very nature, but such a command would surely kill the small, slimy creature.

"And it's something I'm sure you will figure out in time," Pennie calmly added for the sake of encouragement; "You can only try, dearest. I wouldn't be so harsh on yourself." To this, Verosika let out a muffled hum and nodded, her eyes drifting off into the space around her; she was getting pensive, a telltale sign of what Pennie had been told was the onset of disassociation. Hastened was the therapist's effort to assist Verosika in snapping out of her worrisome thoughts, utilizing at her disposal another question; "*Ahem!* So those antidepressants I prescribed for you, how have you found them?"

Not long after thankfully escaping the onset of becoming disassociative, Verosika blinked and said in impromptu; "T-They work, I think. Haven't been feeling complete ass since I've been taking them. So yeah, there's that."

"Any side effects? Say, for example, nausea or fatigue."

"Not like the other ones, no," Verosika outrightly denied with a shake of her head; "Wait so, Pennie darling, speaking of. With those other ones you gave me, what was in them to send my body outta whack? You said that you would look into the cause, how did that go?"

Pennie pushed her glasses further up into her face as she reported with a lack of certainty; "Eh… I-I'm still not any closer to figuring out the cause, to be frank. Everyone I've asked either didn't know what I was talking about, or assured me that there was nothing off about them. Typical of those sloth sons of bitches, they live by their name. They're either complacent, full of themselves, or both, especially when it comes to their "magical cures" and what other pseudo-medicinal bullshit they oversee."

“Sounds about right,” Verosika groaned, rolling her eyes; “But hey, look, thanks for trying for me.”

The hellhound’s little red eyes twinkled; “Oh no, it’s my pleasure!” She cheerfully asserted, the white fluff on her cheeks rising up as she smiled. The cheerfulness which encompassed her face didn’t fade as she then asked; “So! I have one final question for you, before we wrap up our final scheduled appointment. On a scale of one to ten, how do you think you are feeling as of recently, more specifically since we last met?”

“Oh! Well, um…” Verosika’s mind thought back to all the mental strife she had experienced throughout the month which by now seemed like a grueling, tormented eternity. An eternity was definitely a sufficient way of describing what her psyche had fallen victim to, the sleepless, insomniac nights she had endured certainly not helping with the paranoia and crippling anxiety that ailed her. Verosika remembered vividly the firm and ironclad grip on her horns, the gargled, gravelly-voiced threat which the sinner hissed into her ringing ears, and the nauseating stench from his rotting corpse of a body. It was after that very life-or-death crisis did Verosika begin to appreciate her life a whole lot more, but it was Pennie’s soft and overtly cordial methods which helped her return to a newfound sense of normalcy. With all this in mind, after having looked back and to now look forward, Verosika answered with much honesty; “I’d say… I’d say about an eight, just to be safe.”

“Excellent,” Pennie acknowledged, her focus returning to her book for a brief moment to jot down whatever she was writing. The short and sweet hellhound closed the book and shoved her ballpoint pen back into her pocket, at once getting up from her chair again in tandem with Verosika who followed suit; “Alright, that is us done! Wonderful to have had you here, Verosika, you’re a real gem!”

“Awe, I’m flattered,” Verosika cheered with gratitude; “And you’ve been the best therapist I’ve had in ages — no, the best one I’ve ever had! You’re the first one to have never told me to *“just get over it”*, like what other asshats have told me…”

“Ugh! You wouldn’t believe how many instances I hear of that,” Pennie griped; “Funnily enough, they’re usually those from Sloth who just prescribe, prescribe, prescribe! A bunch of sad sacks and pseudo-therapists, that’s what they are.”

Verosika found the short and spontaneous rant entertaining; “Woooff, go off girl!” Side by side both the seasoned psychologist and her patient who dwarfed her, making their way towards the door back out into the waiting room. Just as Pennie grabbed hold of the door handle, a dull thudding sound came from behind them; something weighty had fallen down.

Immediately they stopped and turned around to find the source, with Pennie and her keen eye beating Verosika to the punch. The hellhound let out a soft tut in disapproval; “Oh dangit, not again!”

Verosika raised an eyebrow, watching as her therapist trod swiftly over to the rear wall where a bookshelf stood; “Not what again?”

Pennie sighed as she leant down; “Nothing, just this particular shelf here is lopsided. Always causes my books to topple over,” she said, picking up the pair of books which had fallen haphazardly to the floor; “C-Could I ask for your help? Just to put them up, I’m not as tall as you.”

“Oh- Yeah, sure,” Verosika obliged without much dithering, strutting swiftly over to come to the short young woman’s aid. She took both hardcover books from the fluffy hellhound’s hands, dusting them off from the scuff marks left from their impact with the soft carpeted floor. Having just lightly cleaned the dark brown hardcover which was more lengthy compared to its smaller blue counterpart, Verosika took sudden note of its gold-etched title which glistened underneath the light overhead. She read it carefully, almost infused by what it said: “***An Insight to Ailments, From Mental to Physical.***” Further down the cover was the abbreviated identity of the author; ***“Dr. A.R.C.”*** Familiarity dawned in Verosika’s mind as she read the initials, realizing who it was; “Oh shit, you know Doctor Contifue?”

“I know *of* him, yeah,” Pennie replied with a nod; “Can’t say I ever met him. His name’s big around these parts. Rumor has it that those down in Sloth hate his guts!”

To hear this made Verosika blink; “Hate him, what’s there to hate him for?” Never had she considered the possibility that anyone hated that efficient yet considerate physician.

An almost smug and spiteful smirk grew on Pennie’s muzzle as she stated; “Put it this way, Verosika sweetheart; not many people like challenging the status quo. Furthermore, those who are a part of that very same status quo get *REALLY* pissed off when someone does eventually challenge them. Doctor Contifue is one of those people who love uniqueness in medicine, and those above him in the medical field, being the jackasses they are, do not!”

“Hmph! Sounds like when I first started showbiz,” Verosika remarked with a scoff, returning both books to the spaces where they belonged; “First they hate your fucking guts, then before you know it, they want to literally be you.”

“The circle of life,” Pennie giggled as she led Verosika back outside, this time without interruption. The door effortlessly swung open as both women stepped into the living room, finding that Vortex had arrived in all of his intimidating broad-shouldered glory, his custom tailored black and white suit perfectly ironed with not a stray crease in sight. He was leant up against the wall with his leg crossed and muscular arms folded, the look in his eyes stone cold and aloof as was required in his high-risk line of work.

As was her charming way of grabbing anyone’s attention, Verosika called out; “Yoohoo~! Vortex hon!”

Like a loyal servant to his master, Vortex turned his head towards the succubus who now approached him, a sharp-toothed smile stretching out as he said; “He-hey, boss! I take it that you’re done?”

Verosika’s face was set alight with enthusiasm and hope; “Yup, that’s it! After all that, haha,” she laughed dryly, letting out a grown from being exhausted from the ordeal and its lingering effects in the aftermath. Like the relationships in her life that had ended in a variety of discouraging ways, Verosika felt like she had been exploited by the fear she had been living in for nigh on a month, so today felt to her like a day of much yearned-for liberation. Catharsis had been achieved, and a weight had been lifted up off her shoulders; one must imagine Sisyphus, that is if he had claimed an impossible triumph over his damnation. Verosika turned around and gave Pennie a farewell hug, holding onto the short stocky hellhound and briefly picking her up from her feet, before setting her down again. After fixing up her hair from the sudden embrace, the cheery hellhound bid farewell for one final time, to which Verosika returned the gesture as Vortex escorted her down to the elevators.

With his hands clasped together in front of himself, Vortex asked; “You seem better from this morning.”

“I am, ‘Tex sweetheart, I am,” Verosika expressed with relief, reflecting on the progress she had made in just a short time-frame — just in time for another tour scheduled within a week; “How’s things on the ground down there, all clear?”

“Oh, you know,” Vortex uttered; “You got the odd paparazzi here and there, at most about four, but we’ve managed to get most of them away.”

“That’s a good boy, ‘Tex. Look atchu, taking care of little old me,” Verosika applauded in her naturally sultry little way.

The sharply dressed chauffeur jabbed the elevator's call button, then opened his mouth to speak; "We did have a problem with a Destitute, though," Vortex added just to be on the safe side; "We quickly dealt with him, got him to scurry off."

At this news the succubus seemed to freeze in surprise, like she hadn't expected to hear it. This was made even more evident when she queried; "A Destitute? Huh… W-What's one of them doing this far out of Pride?"

The bodyguard shrugged; "Beats me," he murmured, clearing his throat; "Ahem- Must've, uh, lost his way and probably heard that you were in town, decided to try and harass you."

"*Tsk!* Typical," Verosika shook her head disapprovingly, but paid no mind to it as she was used to it by now; "Thank you for keeping the peace, 'Tex. You're awesome."

Vortex grinned; "Nah, it's nothing, boss." Just as he said this, the speaker above the elevator doors chimed a dull singular tone and the doors rolled silently open, revealing the empty interior. Both the celebrity and her loyal bodyguard stepped in and turned around, facing the empty hospital floor with the spacious waiting room towards the far end. A deep baritone-esque exhale escaped through Vortex's nose before he asked; "So back to showbiz, huh?"

"Yup," Verosika nodded with a faint smile, the elevator doors rolling shut; "Back to showbiz."

Loona, for what had to be the third time that week, had been drawing.

Unusually for the hellhound for this time in the week, she had shut herself off in her room to sketch, the sketchbook and pencils back out in force and delicately scratching away at yet another blank white page. Loona was nearly halfway done with drawing a circle which encompassed about one third of the page, the shape of which was slightly vertically elongated, but not enough to consider it an oval. Playing from her phone in the background as she quietly sketched was a two-hour long audio she had found somewhere online, within it being the sound of faint rain with the occasional mellow coo of a lone mourning dove. In the aftermath in which she needed it most, the audio track soothed her considerably, sending her into a state of tranquil, comfortable numbness, where not a singular intrusive thought clattered about in her mind like a swarm of locusts. Instead of a swarm of tormentous mental locusts, there was stillness, a most welcome stillness which

Loona desperately needed. For the first time that week, Loona felt calm; still shaken, but otherwise calm.

The slightly uneven circle came to a close when Loona joined the curving thin line to its tail-end, thus completing the shape, then with two swift strokes drew a horizontal and vertical line in the circle which crossed over one another. The mourning dove cooed again as Loona began drawing the head, unsure of where exactly this particular sketch was going; perhaps she was just doing it for the sake of it, who knew. Even if the drawing didn't have a meaning, she was still happy with doing it in the first place, the process at the very least giving her the chance to wind down. Loona was working on the cheeks and jawline of the head when suddenly a knock came at her door — it was loud, surprising, and managed to scare the usually unshakable hellhound. She shot her head towards the door and called out cautiously; "H-Hello?"

"It's me, sweetie!" It was Blitz, his highly distinct voice muffled by the door standing guard between him and his daughter.

"Blitz? Where the hell have you been all morning," Loona questioned the very minute she realized it was her father. *"Of course it was him, why wouldn't it be,"* she thought to herself, slightly embarrassed by the fact she jumped in fright to his knocking.

Blitz seemed hesitant to respond, in fact he ignored the question and asked; *"C-Can I come in?"*

Loona continued to stare at the door as she replied; "Can you come in, he asks... You know the rules when it comes to my room, dad, so no. You cannot."

"Loonie sweetheart, please. C-Can you at least come outside and speak to me?"

"Why, what's there to talk about?" Loona demanded to know; she really wasn't in the mood to leave her room unless it was absolutely necessary. "If it's about what happened yesterday, then I'm not interested," the hellhound interrupted from her spare time added forcefully, the shock from it still with her. She still couldn't process what exactly happened there, but she hoped beyond hope that Blitz had told the truth.

Blitz suddenly grew quiet for just a second which Loona could tell was out of hesitation, a stillness which ended when he squeaked; *"M-Maybe? Partially..? Look, I just want to talk to you for a second, sweetie, come on."*

Loona rolled her eyes, running a hand down her face; “Goddammit Blitz, I told you yesterday not to mention it to me! I’m still not comfortable to talk about it yet! Holy shit, did you listen to me or what?”

“I said partially!” Blitz emphasized in a raised tone of voice. The imp’s volume returned to normal when he asked; *“I-I just need to talk to you about something. It’s not about yesterday, I promise!”*

The moody hellhound let out a groan; *“Urgh…* Fine, I’ll come out. Give me a minute.” In a slightly dramatic heave, Loona picked herself up from the chair with sad regrets, having gotten herself blissfully comfortable in the padded swivel chair the hour prior. Now back up on her feet, Loona glanced back at the sketch she had made progress on, an incomplete head starting right back at her; she would complete it later, after she got the mystery conversation with Blitz over and done with. It felt like a slog to Loona, having to haul herself out of her room when both her mind and body protested, but there wasn’t much in the way of a choice, leading her straight out into the living room where she found Blitz waiting with the little patience he had. After nudging the door shut behind her with her leg, Loona sighed and muttered; “Yeah, what is it?”

“Uhm… Hey,” Blitz greeted with unusual hesitancy.

“Hey,” Loona said back with a lazy hand wave, her arm quickly collapsing back by her side.

The imp’s eyes shifted a little before he asked; “How are you?”

“Getting there,” Loona, who was starting to grow suspicious, quickly answered; “…So, what, you just wanted to say 'hi', or what’s going on here?”

“*N-Nooo,* not exactly,” Blitz stammered as he fidgeted with his fingers, certainly not helping his daughter’s growing suspicion; “I needed to talk to you about, uh, something.”

Loona shifted impatiently on her legs as she placed one closed fist on her hip; “Well, I’m right here. Go on, talk to me.” It was at that very second did the growingly suspicious Loona realize that Blitz was sweating hard, a few droplets of sweat running down the side of his face with one of them dripping to the floor. This prompted her to press; “You sure you’re okay there? You look like you just shit yourself.”

Only adding to Loona's confusion was the unsteady laugh Blitz let out; "H-Haha, yeah… Um… I-I might as well have." He swallowed the sizable lump in his throat before he got to stammering even more, his "words" coming out more like an incoherent mess of dysfunctional syllables.

Suspicions only grew larger as Loona narrowed her eyes, trying to figure out exactly what Blitz was up to, or rather what had happened to get him this sheepish. It could've been one out of a multitude of things, all of which spelt trouble. Loona's eyes widened when she reckoned she figured out, in her own mind, exactly what happened; "Blitz I *SWEAR,* if this has got to do with that deadbeat landlord again!"

"Nonono, it's not the landlord this time! I promise!" Blitz shouted; "It's got to do with Stolas."

The mention of the prince hit her like a blunt-force object, almost discombobulating her; "With Stolas?"

"Y-Yeah," Blitz clarified, rubbing the back of his neck in a fidget; "He shot me a text at like four in the morning, said that I needed to come see him at his big, rich-prick palace." Though he had ceased sweating like a stuck pig, the disconcerted imp's face was still drenched; not just with sweat, but with tension as if his entire head was about to burst open. Finally with one great internal heave, Blitz stated; "So bird brain thinks you've, uh, been going up to the human world."

"Noo, really??" Loona blurted out full of sarcasm; "It's almost like that's part of the deal! You know, for our job."

To this Blitz shook his head, waving his hands; "Nonono, of course he knows that part! He means, as in… okay. You know the whole thing from a week or so ago, about not using the grimoire for yourself anymore?"

A small but lingering anxiety began to build inside Loona's brain, rising like a distant yet stalking sentient heat. "What are you saying, that I'm… sneaking out with the grimoire? Blitz, the grimoire's been stuck at work ever since these stupid new conditions came in."

"Okok, listen, I know that," Blitz emphasized, looking just as confused as Loona was, if not more; "But he's really ear-chewingly insistent that you've been going up there on your own somehow,

that he *"feels"* that you have been, whatever the fuck that means. I dunno what's up his feathered ass, but I can tell you he's really on edge about it."

Loona, despite her growing confusion, shrugged this off; "Sucks to be him," she remarked with a facade of feigned indifference.

"Be honest with me, Loona, please," Blitz desperately insisted, almost begging; "I've got that asshole breathing down my neck like a whack-job unless I give him an answer! Have you, or have you not, been sneaking up there on your own getting up to who-knows-what?"

A red flag blared in Loona's head, the heat which was barely noticeable before was now arising into a steady, warm simmer. The air around the hellhound felt more humid the longer she remained silent, trying to conjure up a good enough answer to cover up the pseudo-pilgrimages she knew damn well she was guilty of. Loona knew Blitz long enough to know that when it came to her, his very own daughter, he could be a little naive, especially coupled with her exceptional expertise in lying. For the second time in the past two weeks, Loona put this little 'talent' of hers to work, swallowing the lump in her throat before saying clear and concisely; "Blitz, look at me. Now I don't know whatever is going on in Stolas' little head, but I swear to you with my life, I am *NOT* doing anything stupid. Besides, even if I was, what's there for me to look at up there? There's no reason for me to be up in the human world."

"That's not what Stolas said," Blitz flatly rebuked, his eyes narrowed into a suspecting squint with his arms folded like a disapproving father.

"Stolas said is what Stolas said," Loona retorted with a roll of her eyes; "But it's not the truth. He could be fucking with you for whatever reason, ever thought of that?"

"Heheh. He sure does *fuck* with me alright," the imp blurted out with a smirk for his daily dose of an innuendo, an impulse at this point. Quickly he snapped out of it with a shake of his head, his sharp-toothed half-grin falling into a frown, "You know, Loonie, I wanna trust you, I really do! Christ on a stick, believe me! But Stolas is really adamant that you're doing something you shouldn't, and he's kinda scaring me about it."

Loona grunted with convincing fake dismissal; "So what if he's adamant? People can be adamant and still be wrong."

“Okay but again, sweetpea, I already understand that, I do!” Blitz’s voice almost echoed in the apartment as he tried to keep the peace between them; “But— hmph… But I’m just a little inclined to believe him, even if it sounds whacko, ‘cause—”

“Because of that whole grimoire deal. Right, gotcha,” Loona interrupted without a second thought, her conclusion probably a little more harsher than was needed. The pressure was really on her shoulders now, and the increasingly cornered Loona needed to act quickly so as to maintain her “innocence” in the issue at hand. Luckily for her, improvisation was one of her stronger points. There was no time to lose, and Loona knew this well, who at once attempted to alleviate Blitz’s concerns; “To be frank, dad, I really don’t think Stolas has been well since, you know… that whole "thing" went down. Come on, you remember seeing the burns on him, he looked like shit! Hell, Via told me about how out of it he was. I don’t want to slander the guy or call him a liar, but you should probably take what he thinks is real or not with a grain of salt. I know it sounds blunt, but yeah, that’s just… how it is, I guess.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right,” Blitz supposed to Loona’s relief. His mouth went slack as a realization dawned in his yellow eyes, prompting him to mention; “Say, you never told me about what happened that night.”

Loona tilted her head; “Didn’t I?”

Blitz shook his head. Loona braced herself for the game of “Twenty Questions” she was about to participate in against her will, a game which luckily for the apprehensive hound never came. The tall imp pushed himself off from the wall he leant against, sluggishly trudging over to the couch which awaited for him to collapse face-first into its cushiony goodness; a calling which the obviously exhausted father fully abided by. His voice was muffled when he groggily asked; “What time is it?”

“It’s, uh, seven-twenty-five,” Loona announced after looking at the wall clock hanging near the front door.

A low gurgling protest groan emanated from Blitz’s cushion-covered mouth which only led to a brief moment of quiet from him. Eventually he croaked again; “Fuck it, I’m going back to sleep. Tell M&M we’re opening two hours late…”

“Whatever,” Loona acknowledged with her phone already in her hands, at once sending a quick text to Millie announcing the sudden arrangement. As soon as she sent the message, Loona went to

occupy herself with something else on the device, only for a response to come no less than five seconds later with a ***"Ping!"***

Mildly surprised by the response time, the hellhound went to read it, finding that Millie had sent a simple "thumbs up" emoticon. What was more, the imp native to her Wrath home was busy typing another message which was completed and sent in no time at all. Loona raised an eyebrow with even more surprise and curiosity at what the second message read; ***"DW about coming in today. Getting my sis to cover for you. That ok?"***

At this the stunned hellhound blinked, not expecting this proposition in a million years. It was as if a miracle had happened, after all Loona had been planning on announcing that very day to I.M.P's now snoring CEO that she called it quits. Feeling both surprise and relief at exactly the same time, Loona quickly typed a reply and sent it pronto; ***"Sounds good. Thank you."*** Away went Loona's phone as she shut it off, placing it in the pocket of her purple pajama shorts as she trod on over to the kitchen to fix both herself and Blitz something to eat. Really the previous on edge young woman was in no mood to listen to any reservations Stolas had about her, for she hadn't done anything wrong as far as she was aware. And so what if she had been going up to the human world? She was well within her right to do so, and what's more, it was none of the prince's business where she went. As Loona poured two bowls of cereal for both herself and Blitz for when he finally woke up, she made her decision; she was going to go up again, out of spite. Restrictions, deals, any sort of arrangements be damned.

And so it came to pass that Blitz awoke from his sudden crash, having slept noisily for two hours straight. Loona, acting as his part-time nurse maid, handed the freshly awake imp his bowl of cereal which he ate without a second thought, giving himself some time to gather his bearings before he began his slog of a day. On account of him having crashed in his clothes after his meeting with what sounded to be a very anxious Stolas, Blitz's preparation time was halved, reduced to relieving and cleaning himself up in the bathroom. This took no more than five minutes, and before too long I.M.P's very own founder and manager was up and ready to go. Loona informed Blitz about Millie's proposition, an idea which at first he seemed reluctant with on account of an extra mouth to feed so to speak. This reluctance was quashed when he remembered what Loona had said to him the day before by the curbside, and so his mind was made up. After fixing up the way his coat hung on his shoulders, Blitz went straight for the door and grabbed hold of the knob, but before he twisted it, he turned back to Loona; "Loonie?"

"Yeah?" Loona responded from her open bedroom door, her leg halfway inside her room after having frozen to Blitz's call.

"Will you be okay," the imp almost sheepishly asked, careful yet straightforward with his words.

“I’ll be okay, dad,” Loona nodded in return with a short and simple answer, hoping it was good enough for the concerned paternal figure in her life.

At first Blitz looked uncertain to his daughter’s short and ‘sweet’ response, but eventually his small, indecisive frown turned into a warm smile as he opened up his arms for a hug; “Wanna bring it in,” he asked as an offering.

Loona glared at the open-armed imp and let out a drawn-out breath, then tilted her head up to the sky and shook her head; she couldn’t believe what she was going to do next. And so, with an almost slow waltz, Loona pulled away from her room and went up to Blitz, stopping the second she was a mere step away. With a great eye roll, she opened up her arms and muttered; “Fine, but quickly.” Before she even knew it, Blitz had enthusiastically wrapped his arms around her torso and hugged tightly, with Loona returning the gesture with a pet of his head as a cherry on top. As was the hellhound’s condition, Blitz pulled away and hid his daughter farewell, grabbing his keys before shutting the door behind him. And with that, Loona was alone again.

The brief sappiness which permeated the room quickly dissipated, giving way to stillness which facilitated room for Loona to plot. With an almost excited skip in her step, she made a beeline right into her room and went to grab her stuff; her bag, sketchbook, stationary, phone, wallet, and a beer from her mini fridge for good measure. Now Loona was going to go out anyway whether anyone liked it or not, but the idea that she was doing this against Stolas’ wishes felt strangely exhilarating, even more so when she grabbed her own set of apartment keys, slipped out the door, and headed straight for the elevator. With an almost cocky smirk and the copy of the portal summoning spell in her clutches, Loona murmured to herself; “Eat shit, Stolas.”

(Act II) - Tough Love

Loona's day out started with a stumble, nearly tripping over herself when she stepped through the portal, the weight of all the stuff in her bag definitely not helping; "W-S-SHIT!!" Loona spluttered wildly mid-trip, managing to plant her hand against the wall her nose almost met with, catching herself just in time. "H-Hah, *hah*... You idiot, Loona," Loona sharply panted, calming down from the sudden adrenaline rush.

After nearly having her face careen into the brick wall beside her, Loona regained her footing with a sharp breath out and looked around, finding herself in the same alleyway she landed in last time; same dampness, same stench, same feeling. Quickly the hellhound changed into her human form in a quick-vanishing veil of bright sorcery, emerging from it as just another unsuspecting young woman doing unsuspecting things, just another pedestrian going about her day with not a single care in the world. Now fully prepared for her spiteful outing, Loona trod casually out of the alleyway with both hands pulling at her backpack straps, choosing to head left on a whim without much of a set destination. If anything, she just felt like walking, wandering around like a lost hiker with nothing but the wind to guide her.

Gradually Loona became comfortable with her surroundings, especially with the cool brisk wind which graced over her, so much so that she began to drift off into comfortable aimlessness. To her, this felt nothing more than just a walk in one of Wrath's parks, except the air was far cleaner, and void of the cacophony of a bloody imp-on-hellhound fistfight somewhere in the distance with cheering for either side all around. In fact, to Loona's casual observation, everything was 'cleaner' up here in this country city which she couldn't quite remember the name of; the footpath on which she strolled leisurely on, the roads themselves, the local flora, the noise too in its own unique extent, uncluttered and undisturbed except for the traffic. Loona took it all in, allowing herself to be immersed in where she found herself, unaware until the last minute that she had just stopped in front of a very familiar place. Her smile dropped as she looked to her left, past the stone wall, and right up at the white and gold architectural marvel which stood before her in its rightful, most holy grounds.

A soft suppressed laugh escaped the hellhound's lips as she shook her head. "Back here again, huh? Can't get away from this place," Loona mumbled to herself with a half-smirk, gazing particularly up at the tall golden domes which acted as stands for the stark gold Orthodox crosses. She let out a short, sharp breath, almost in disbelief of where she had ended up. Loona shivered; "Fuck being comfortable, I guess."

It was then that Loona tried to find an excuse not to go in, though she felt tempted to due to a lack of elsewhere to go, feeling akin to a curious moth drawn to a light source it was beginning to grow cordial with. Loona itchingly tapped her foot against the pavement where she stood idly, spinning her head this way and that to find something — anything — else to do. But every single time, like a

magnet, her eyes kept being drawn to the deserted and idle grounds absent of hustle and bustle. It was then Loona supposed that she could always just stay for a little bit, a moment of peace to herself before she went off and did something else. A quick five— no; a quick ten-minute in and out. Yes, that is what Loona would do; just a few minutes to laze about, that's what she would give herself. Where's the harm in that? And so the disguised hound crept onto the grounds, hopping over the relatively low stone wall and heading straight towards the plentiful shade of that same-old oak tree by the plinthed statue. Cautiously Loona looked around the grounds to make sure nobody was there; the gates were shut, the compact car park empty, and everything was locked up, meaning that nobody was there except for her. This also meant that Loona was trespassing, making her impromptu visit and stay even more risky.

Though she felt on edge due to her intrusion, Loona couldn't help but feel a certain peace being in the company of herself. Her shoes made contact with the morning dew-rich grass, becoming wet with the moisture which seeped off the trimmed turf like she had just stepped on a rinsed sponge. The driest part of the lawn looked to be directly underneath the tree under its canopy of leaves, and so that is where Loona headed, walking right up to the oak's thick girth of a trunk, plonking herself down with her back resting up against it, resting her bag beside her too. Every single muscle in Loona's body loosened up the second she got comfortable, the ecstasy of relaxation settling in like an internal therapeutic wave, letting her legs sprawl out lazily across the grass and hands dangling loosely in her lap. A small toothy smile spread across Loona's lips as she shook her head weakly; "What the hell am I doing here," she said with a snicker. The "human's" red-iris eyes tempted by the shine of them looked back up at the domes, silently wondering to herself how exactly they managed to fix them up there, let alone haul them up in the first place.

An idea appeared out of nowhere in Loona's mind as if turned on by a switch, figuring that then and there would be a good time and place to sketch. And so that is that she did, unzipping her bag and pulling out her book and a pencil, flipping through to the blank half-finished mugshot she had drawn earlier. The "head" was little more than a base circle and the general outline of a chin, a few very short lines jutting downwards from either side of the chin signifying the start of a neck. Just as Loona was about to move on to where she reckoned the brow should be, she began to wonder as to 'who' exactly she would draw. She couldn't just stop at just some blank head, especially after all the time and effort she had put into it. Loona thought about this as she scribbled, before freezing when a sort of epiphany hit her. The artistic hound's eyes flicked upwards, honing in on the gray pedestal, the statue's shoes just within her sight. Loona cocked one eyebrow up in thought, thinking on it for a mere moment before mutely making her decision.

"Oh hey, it's you!" A sudden voice called out from outside Loona's peripheral, the notable accent and feminine pitch familiar to her despite only ever hearing it once. It wasn't hard for the solitary hound to figure out who the voice belonged to.

In shock Loona lurched forward and threw her head to the right; *"GAH!!* What the fuck!!" Loona blurted out in surprise, her tongue far from suitable for where she was. Instantly with her wide

eyes, the startled hellhound recognized the face approaching her; “O-Oh! It’s, uh, it’s you! Hey you’re uh, um, ah…”

The unexpected arrival was none other than Svetlana in the flesh, her hands tucked snugly into her gray hoodie’s pockets as she sauntered over. She chortled at Loona’s shock; “It’s only me, calm down,” Svetlana assured; “Didn’t expect to see you here!”

“Oh! Heh, um… M-Me neither? Hah-hah, yeah,” Loona nervously laughed with a forced full grin, the muscles in her cheeks straining from how hard she was trying to act natural with little success. The wide-eyed hound shifted the focus from herself, and onto the Slavic girl standing before her; “What’re you doing here?”

“Funny,” Svetlana laughed, rocking on her heels; “I was going to ask you the same thing! What’s your name again, sorry?”

“It-It’s Loona,” the shaken hellhound lightly stuttered, finding the courage to speak concisely again.

“Loona! Of course, how could I have forgotten? Sorry for asking, I’ve never been good at remembering names.”

“Nono, don’t worry about it,” Loona assured and accepted the apology, her nerves finally recovered from the surprise; “It’s not like I come here every day. This is only, what, my second time here? Sorry, I know I shouldn’t be here. I know I’m probably trespassing.”

“Uh-huh. And what do you think *I’m* doing right now,” Svetlana pointed out, throwing out her arms to emphasize her presence, the look in her eyes telling Loona that the answer was pretty obvious.

Loona froze as she looked up at the girls, the gears in her head whirring for a second longer before she asked cautiously; “Wait, so do you mean I’m not trespassing, or…”

No clarity came to Loona’s pressing question when Svetlana let off an exaggerated shrug; “I dunno! Father Aleksander hasn’t said anything about opening hours, so probably not.” In an openly investigative sort of fashion as opposed to Loona’s initial wish to be left alone, Svetlana threw an open-palmed hand out and pressed; “What’s that there, in your hands?”

At first Loona didn't understand what the hoodie-cladded girl was referring to, until her eyes glanced quickly down at the open article in her hands, before looking back up; "That's my… sketchbook," she hesitantly said; "I was gonna sketch out some shi– some stuff, and, you know, just get lost in my own little world. That was the plan, then you butt your nose in." That last observation from Loona sounded a little bit more harsh than what she had intended, but in that moment she felt that a day owed nothing to but herself had been ruined. So much for a quiet time, the inconvenienced hellhound thought then and there. Hastily Loona added before Svetlana could get a word in; "And what's with scaring me like that, like c'mon!"

"Not my fault you weren't paying attention," Svetlana remarked with a cocky smirk, managing to take Loona slightly aback from her never-before-seen light teasing. Up until then, the unusual visitor to these consecrated grounds assumed that she was the one with the upper hand in dishing out comebacks, so the Slavic girl's ability to also dish them out humbled the hound. "Touche," Loona thought to herself. Suddenly Svetlana hit the seated visitor with another question; "Can I sit down?"

Loona knew that this was phrased rhetorically, a sort of feigned request which was going to go the asker's way anyhow. With this assumption, she gestured her hand out; "Go right ahead," she said, her dislike for being disturbed so suddenly masked by indifference. Svetlana took this as an opportunity to sit a mere foot beside Loona who squirmed away, shielding the contents of her open sketchbook with an uncomfortable look on her face. Regardless of the unexpected and borderline unwanted one-man audience, Loona was determined to get back to what she was doing, wiping away a stray hair from her face using the pencil before setting it to paper. The amateur artist let out a short sigh as she began sketching, her keen eyes intently fixated on the page as the head began to take shape, the cheeks and top of the head finally making its debut. Just as all was still, from the corner of her eye Loona noticed that Svetlana was lying flat against the grass, her arms and legs spread out either direction like she was about to make a snow angel. This prompted the artistic hound's eyes to turn away from the page to ask; "What are you doing?"

"Looking up there," Svetlana said in a sing-song kind of way, lazily pointing up to the sky. The sky was remarkably clear, a wondrous bright blue display absent of clouds.

"Cool," was Loona's brief reply as she got back to sketching, looming over the page with her back arched akin to a prawn's. She bit her tongue in concentration as she continued to draw, at last completing the outline of the head and the general outline of where a nose would soon be. Just as Loona was about to continue, she felt a pop in her back, causing her to recoil in pain; *"Agh!!* Argh, shit!!"

Svetlana piped up once again, her head rolling right towards her agonized companion; "You okay there?"

“D-Does it sound like I’m okay,” Loona growled in pure agony with a deep scowl, quickly getting to massaging a particular spot on her back; “Agh, *goddammit!* Stupid back, stupid tree! Piece of sh *—nff!!”*

“Hey, it’s not the tree’s fault you’re all hunched over,” the Slavic girl gave no hesitation to state; “Lie down in the grass here, give yourself some relief!”

“And get my back wet? No-argh! I-I’m… good,” Loona shakily declined as she rested her back up against the oak’s trunk, grunting harshly as the pain continued to sting. It wasn’t any small pain, either, rather it felt like she had just been stabbed in the back by the sharpest dagger imaginable.

Svetlana let out a breath as she continued to lay there motionlessly, remarking in an almost critiquing way; “Alright. Suit yourself.”

A glare was shot Svetlana’s way from Loona who seemed slightly irritated by the hoodie-clad girl’s lack of sympathy, only made worse by the pain in her back which seemed to be waning as quickly as it emerged. This irritation vanished when Loona froze to think on it, looking down at the sketch well and truly on its way towards being done, then looked down at the grass beneath her, finding that her assumption of it being “wet” was greatly exaggerated. “Ah, what the hell,” Loona grumbled to herself, setting aside her sketchbook and scooting over with her hands onto more of that sweetly luscious grass. The hellhound never had felt so stiff in her life as she cautiously oriented herself back-first onto the grass, mostly paranoid about making the pain come back tenfold. But fret as she might, Loona made it to the ground with little event, except for the cathartic release which she felt when nothing happened. A sigh of relief left the pale goth’s mouth which Svetlana picked up on; “Feels better, doesn’t it?”

“H-Haha, yeah. It- uh, it sure does,” Loona conceded through an unsteady breath which soon corrected itself, the shock from the sudden pain at last fading away like mist against wind. Soon as the gothic hellhound felt relieved enough, and as her pupils contained in a deep ruby red gazed up into the vibrant blue heavens, she struck up conversation; “So yeah. What are you doing here?”

“Thinking,” Svetlana simply uttered, her stacked hands acting as a pillow for her head against the grass; “And you?”

“To be frank? I’m here out of spite,” Loona smirked; “Turns out some people don’t like me coming up here.”

This made Svetlana blink, catching her by mild surprise; “What, so, people don’t like you coming? Like, here specifically?”

The hound broke out a snort; “Snrk— Apparently! Hell if I know. To them me being here is like some grave mistake, as if I’m going to die or what have you.”

“Hm! Sounds a little paranoid,” Loona’s one-woman audience grinned humorously; “Maybe a little dramatic.”

To hear that someone agreed with her conviction made Loona enthusiastic to talk; “Right?? Like dude, c’mon! It’s not like I’m doing any harm coming here! I’m just, y’know, checking the place out. Honestly I’m glad they don’t know I’m here, otherwise they’d drag me straight back to…” Just like that the words on the hellhound’s lips dropped dead like a stone when she bit her tongue, the certain single-syllabled ‘H’ word causing her to cease talking any further. She realized just in time that such a mention of where she really came from would incriminate her, or in the best case scenario make things awkward between the two of them, more than they kind of already were.

Needless to say the abrupt silence caught Svetlana’s attention, who prodded her companion to finish; “Drag you where,” she asked.

“N-Nowhere, forget about it,” Loona dismissed with a flap of her hand while lost in that blanket of perfect blue above; “Just speaking out my ass. You know how you hang around certain people who don’t understand you, and you end up just getting confused because of that?”

“Mm… I think I know what you mean,” Svetlana nodded quietly, also staring up into the heavenly blue abyss as she had done so from the get-go. She added with a wispy tempered huff; “I’ve got people like that in my life. Everyone’s confused in their own sort of way. I am, you probably are — no offense.”

Loona waved her hand lazily, a humorless smile slithering across her face; “None taken,” she half-whispered, allowing her arm to plop back to the earth. She sniffed and added with pensiveness; “It’s a weird old world out there. It’s full of weird old things, and populated by even weirder people. That’s what I’ve learnt, sometimes the hard way. We don’t know Jack shit about it. Probably never will.” Loona heard Svetlana mumble something along the lines of a “yeah” and maybe a “you’re right” before her voice too petered off, the pair of them taking a blissful moment to silently gaze upwards with no goal in mind.

Funnily enough, this was the first time in ages where the hellhound, usually caught up in something or rather, had no plan at all, for there was nothing then and there to plan against. There was simply no threat to outsmart; no disturbance, no conflicting interest, and no sense of foreboding, except for maybe the threat of an overhead bird deciding that Loona's face was the perfect spot to relieve itself. Other than that, a secure peace reigned. All was still. Loona liked it, she liked it a lot. She desired it, and that desire was answered wholeheartedly. It fulfilled a part within the hellhound that she never got the chance to tend to, neglected because of the lifestyle she had grown so accustomed with; not comfortable, for she never truly was with it all, but merely accustomed. Bizarrely enough to her, Loona felt content, but content in a way which she was unfamiliar with. She thought of another word, one which made her snicker through a thin smile of sorts: 'Cathartic'. Loona wanted this 'cathartic' restful feeling. She began to yearn for it. She began to want more. Just as the restful hellhound began to feel she was about to drift off to sleep, she caught Svetlana's voice begging for her attention; "Hey, um… Loona, was it?"

To this question Loona forced herself back awake; "Uaahh… T-That's my name," she replied at the tail end of a yawn, then smacked her lips together; "What's up?"

"I know we've only really just met," the girl acknowledged cautiously; "But uh, I-I might need your help with something. Nothing big, promise! I just wanted to ask if you could come with me somewhere."

Loona paused at this, her past experiences with favors contributing to her hesitancy; "I mean, sure, I guess. Depends on where you need me."

"Oh no, nowhere fancy! Just a visit somewhere, uhm… I-I-I've told you about my uncle, haven't I?"

"Mm… Briefly," Loona recalled; "Nikita, right?"

A playful scoff came the hellhound's way. "Hey, no fair! You're better at remembering names than me," commended Svetlana in all friendliness, before getting into the more grittier reason for her question; "Ahem! Anyway, yeah. So I promised dad that I would go check up on uncle Niki today. It's kinda an obligatory thing we have to do every so often, w-we check up on him every week, or-yanno, whenever we.. can." More and more, Loona began to notice the tinge of nervousness which came with Svetlana's explanation, piquing the hound's interest in a suspicious sort of way. The Slavic girl continued to explain, clumsily at that; "Usually I'd have mom or dad with me to go see him. One time I got Roman to come, that quiet evil-eyed guy you met, but that's another story. But

see, mom and dad are both busy today, and Roman's busy doing… whatever he does, so yeah. For today, eheh.. I'm by myself."

So far the oddly skittish niece's tell-all about her personal life had really gripped Loona's attention. The gothic girl's eyes shifted before replying; "So you want me to tag along with you to go visit your uncle. Is that right?"

Squeamishly Svetlana sunk into her shoulders, her gray hoodie bunching up; *"Ehh… Y-Yeeeeah.* I mean- it's up to you! I-I-I'd just like someone to come along because, well… moral support?"

Loona laughed; not at Svetlana, but rather at herself; "Ha! I'm really not the best candidate for moral support, Svetlana. There's a *whole* lotta people out there that can attest to that. *Pfuh!* Assholes…"

"Oh for— Loona- mff! Come on, please," the brown-haired girl begged and pleaded, at this point sounding a little desperate; "It'd really help if I had someone with me when I go visit. His mood hasn't exactly been the best at times, and it hurts me when I do go see him and he's all surly and shitty! It's better when I've got someone with me, it helps me cope. Plus, you… you seem nice, but headstrong. And yes, I do sound really selfish right now, I get that! But I kinda, uh, need someone like you, j-just to be there."

"So you're telling me you want me to just stand there and watch as you check up on your uncle," Loona recited back to Svetlana, going over the conditions of the favor in her head over and over, like it was some bizarre equation which didn't quite add up.

"Ye-Yeah!" Svetlana sheepishly with a strained rigid smile, almost rictus in nature the longer it stayed in place; "…Please?"

Thrown upon Loona's shoulders was yet another decision she had to make. A day meant for herself now had a spanner in the works, one that a part of the "inconvenienced" hellhound quietly loathed. Then it hit her; Loona was being asked a question from someone who, out of some selflessness which the outsider personally found misplaced, had helped her only a couple nights ago. A usually closed off and abrupt Loona squirmed; Who was she kidding? While battling against the urge to say a flat-out *'no'*, the visibly strained young woman squeezed out; "I mean- umf… Alright, I'll come. But just this once, okay?"

A delighted wide smile devoid of shyness beamed bright on her face, a light gleeful gasp escaping through it; “Aw, Loona! Thank you so, so much! I-I don’t know what to say, I—”

“Don’t say anything,” Loona voiced over the bob-haired girl’s excited thank yous, heaving herself upright into a sitting position which Svetlana also copied; “Let’s just get this over and done with.”

“Oh, right,” Svetlana hastily composed herself, ironing out her hoodie from the creases which had formed; “Yeah, o-of course! I’ve got a car so we’ll drive there, it’ll only take five minutes.”

“Ngh! Great,” Loona grunted as she stood back up, collecting her belongings which she stowed neatly into her backpack, holding it in her hand by the hand strap. She outstretched her hand, saying through a short breath; “Lead the way.”

"Lead the way" is exactly what a far more enthusiastic Svetlana did, almost excitedly trodding along with a hop as if she now looked forward to the obligatory visit. While she was acting outwardly begrudging about the whole “bring your friend to family matters day” arrangement, Loona gave off to herself a small, secretive smile, one which she quickly shook off. The idea of making someone happy to her felt strangely good. It felt to Loona that, in one way or another, she had made a difference. Both loiterers in a low saunter left the church grounds, hopping over the stone wall where a small white Toyota hatchback awaited them, a small red ‘P’ magnetic plate stuck to the hood which Loona had seen before on a select few other cars. The pale gothic “tag-along” invited herself into the front passenger’s seat, in near unison with the driver who had already thrown the key into the ignition.

“I don’t do this kinda thing often, by the way,” Loona warned after the car rumbled to life; “Try not to get used to this, capiche? Just thought I’d tell you.”

“I know,” Svetlana said in a sing-song tone, the car already out on the road from where it was parked; “Again, no offense, but I… heh. I kinda figured.”

The hound’s hand was deep within her bag when the driver’s comment took her aback. She cocked her head to the right and made a slight face; “Excuse me?”

Svetlana pulled back her lips from her teeth as she cringed a little, perhaps realizing that the comment did in fact bring offense. “You remind me of someone I knew,” she quickly yet casually explained; “She kinda had this closed off approach to things, took her a little while to open up and

get used to certain stuff. No-Not that there's anything wrong with that! You just reminded me of her."

At first Loona didn't quite know how to take this, but before too long she brushed it aside with an indifferent hum and a brief flex of her eyebrows. In a slow motion still mindful of her earlier spinal incident, Loona brought herself back up with the sketchbook now in her lap, flipping it open to the work-in-progress mugshot with pencil intertwined between her fingers. The hound with a developing knack for art gazed at the progress thus far, the 'sketch' beginning to turn into a fully fledged drawing, and something which she saw fit to be proud of. Loona flexed her mouth in concentration and she fidgeted the lead pencil in between her black nail-polished fingers, deciding on what she should draw next. Then like a switch an idea came, and with pencil to paper Loona began to sketch out the eyes, the bumps in the road making what would be a menial effort that bit more tricky. Now the hellhound was no fan of awkward silences, especially ones which directly involved her. This prompted her to strike up a conversation between herself and the driver, bringing up casually; "So run it by me again. Why do you have to see your uncle, what's up with him?"

"You know, Loona, I wish I could tell you simply," the niece sighed almost somberly; "He's a bit… Well, mom calls him an *"Otshelnik".* You know what that means?"

"Nope. Never heard of it," Loona shook her head, multitasking between drawing and listening.

"It means 'hermit'," Svetlana revealed, seeming to squirm in her seat when she recalled the title unceremoniously put upon her fabled relative. She explained further; "And don't get me wrong, I love momma! I really do! But– you know, I wish she'd be just a bit more understanding. Doesn't help that she and Uncle Niki have never seen eye to eye, nor have they ever talked without eventually, um… fighting? And it's not brotherly-sisterly stuff either, it's like very ugly fighting."

Loona paused when she heard this, taking a minute to look up from her project and look towards the driver; "When you mean "*fighting"*, you mean…"

"Just words," Svetlana revealed in a half-mumble; "Big, horrible words at that. Momma's usually a lovely lady, a really gentle soul. But when you put her in a room with uncle without papa — excuse my language, but holy shit, she gets going!"

"Wow. Uh, shit. I can imagine," Loona cringed, a discomfort arising within her and a memory from years ago was rekindled. She couldn't remember how old she was, but she was definitely a teenager, curled up into a depressed and hopeless ball by the head of her musky bed, listening to the echoing holler of an argument just outside her cell. Loona remembered that a hellhound had arrived

that day; a small, flimsy thing with black and brown matted fur and a ragged shirt, being brought in by two parents who obviously had a gut full — not just of the poor kid, but also of each other. Their voices were immense, filled with hatred, and the words they used sent shivers up Loona's spine, even today. They both sounded barbaric, and when the hopeless and afraid Loona leaned over to catch a glimpse of them, she could see that one of them had a fresh three-clawed gash across their right eye, the blood still trickling down their fur at the rate of a cut artery. Half of the insults she knew now, she learnt from those two grown hounds exchanging hateful barbs at each other. It was awful, the way they screamed at each other. The malice that day, in an already malicious environment, was unbelievable.

A troubled Svetlana, still so far firm in her responsibility, let out a humor-devoid chuckle. She turned left at a set of traffic lights when she grinned; "I bet you can't. It gets really… sick. And it's not like uncle is innocent, sometimes he starts them. Maybe more times than I'd like to admit. … Ugh- You're the first one I'm gonna admit this to, but this whole thing weighs me down a lot. I try to get him to come outta his shell, to stop being a hermit, but he insists on—"

"Can I say something? Just really quick," the hellhound quickly interjected, her request instantly getting the human girl's approval to go ahead; "This whole 'thing' with this uncle of yours, so far it all sounds really fucked up. Sorry if it sounds harsh, but it really does. It's affecting you, too, I can tell! All props to you for caring so much, Svet, but maybe you shouldn't do this anymore."

The gears began to turn behind Svetlana's eyes; "Wh-What do you mean? As in, stop seeing him?"

"Exactly that," Loona insisted; "Like he didn't even come to that "party" a few nights ago! Did he even apologize for not coming?"

Svetlana's face began to grow dimmer, and pensive even more so; "No, he didn't. But… look, Loona, I know he's a good guy. He has to be!"

"Yeah, well, not everyone is," the hellhound refuted; "Sorry, but as harsh as it sounds, it's true. This might break your heart, not that I mean to, but maybe… maybe he just isn't as good as you think." A coarse choice of words, and Loona knew this, fully expecting to hear a refute to her refutation; but that refute never came. Svetlana had retreated into silence, her face coated with indecision and she pursed her lips, the observant passenger's words obviously having an inward and outward effect. Now it wasn't like Loona was glad she had gotten the selfless girl to reconsider, if anything it looked heartbreaking, but she was "glad" in a sense that she managed to send a message, even if said message was perhaps a little assumptive.

The sudden unshakable quiet which had settled in the car became increasingly unsettling, a cause for Loona to start wondering if she had said the wrong thing. Her fears were set aside for the time being when Svetlana piped up, stating; “I’m still going to do this, Loona. C-Can you still come up with me, to his apartment?”

“Hey, I didn’t say I was pulling out,” Loona reassured without a doubt, trying to work up a smidgeon of encouragement, ironically enough; “Still here, aren’t I?”

A dry titter came as a response; “There’s that, sure,” Svetlana conceded, pulling her lips back to resemble a grin of sorts; a grin with no sincerity, it was, instead plagued with unease and doubt.

The rest of the drive was completed in unsettled quietude, and in the meantime Loona worked on her developing sketch, both eyes and the beginning of a nose having been illustrated by the time the car slowed down and pulled into a driveway. The sudden jolt of tires against the break in the road made Loona lift her head up, finding before her a carpark positioned adjacent to a three-storey brick apartment building. On all three floors was a long covered balcony which ran lengthways across the building, each floor containing eight residences for a total capacity of twenty-four. Every single door was painted the same egg white, the only discernible difference being a unique room number fastened squarely at eye level. Time was no friend to this structure, as shown by the sharp, elongated streaks of dark grime from rain running down the exterior brickwork that made up the stairwell. In spite of the drab appearance of the glorified brick box, there was at least a patch of greenery neighboring the far end of the apartment where the carpark ended, along with a singular faded red bench, and a small juvenile tree planted to the right. Svetlana pulled the car into a free spot and it crawled to a stop, cutting the engine off having once shifted the gear into ‘park’ and pulled the handbrake. “Okay, um. Here we are,” Svetlana announced drably; “This is it.”

Loona craned her neck down to look up at the apartment through the window; “Wow. Sure looks like a fun place to live in,” the undercover hound remarked sarcastically.

“This is where he chooses to live,” Svetlana sighed; “I dunno why. You just know he’s cooped up there, doing who-knows-what. Probably nothing, as usual.”

“You’re really selling me on this guy, Svet,” Loona huffed, getting out of the car and leaving her belongings behind. She leant up against the car and swung her right leg back-and-forth to wake it up, Svetlana in the meantime also getting out before locking the car manually with the key. The niece mirrored Loona by leaning up against the car as she looked up at the top floor, her expression unreadable, acting as a barely foolproof mask for the millions of emotions she must’ve been feeling. Loona noticed this, who in a softened voice asked; “Sure you wanna go up?”

At this Svetlana blinked, snapping out of her unique variant of a trance; “Um… Yeah. Yeah, we’ll go up. We gotta go to the third floor, up the stairs.” With a little hesitance in her step, Svetlana made headway towards the rightmost staircase, Loona following closely behind who glanced up at the first floor, trying to guess which one would be this ‘Uncle Nikita’s’ place of residence — or rather, his personal, reclusive brick cave.

The pair’s footsteps echoed in dull thugs up the concrete steps, making up to the first floor before Loona asked; “Sorry for asking, Svet, but how do you know he even wants to see you?”

“Look, he just does,” Svetlana affirmed when she ascended past the first floor; “I’m sure of it. Nobody just sits alone like that and doesn’t think “I wish someone would come see me” every once in a while. Besides, he seemed fine when I saw him on my own a few weeks back, and we talked!”

“Yeah, but that’s because you’re his niece—”

“That’s the point!” Svetlana half-shouted, causing Loona to freeze halfway up the second flight. The girl ironclad in her responsibility blew out a calming breath and said; “Just trust me on this one, Loona, please. It’ll be fine, peachy even! Just watch.”

“Mmm, okay,” Loona muttered with uncertainty, following Svetlana in a light jog who had just reached the third floor, the hellhound only a few steps behind. The goth woman’s light jog slowed into a saunter, then into a scoot as the bob-cut girl in front of her slowed to a stop in front of ‘Room 25’. From somewhere inside the room was the muffled sound of music playing from a stereo, faint but loud enough to hear, an electric guitar playing its chords before the vocalist sang the song’s indiscernible lyrics.

Mutely Loona read Svetlana’s face, watching as her chest rose and fell deeply in slow, methodical breaths. She turned to a blank-faced Loona and asked; “You ready?”

“Whenever you are,” Loona insisted with a shrug, her eyes darting between the door and the uncertain looking woman.

After nodding quietly, Svetlana turned back to the door and raised her knuckles up, ready to knock. She let them hover a mere inch away before at last she committed — ***Knok-Knok-Knok-Knok!*** — Svetlana’s knocks were rapid, brief, but sounded loud enough to hear from over the music. After no more than a few seconds' wait, the music came to an abrupt halt, the occupant having evidently paused the rhythmic and grungy cacophony. The shuffling and scraping of shoes against the floor

came from somewhere inside, sounding heavy and uncoordinated like the tenant was lightly tripping over himself, or dragging his feet in reluctance to answer. Each uneven footfall got closer and closer, sounding even more sluggish than the last blunt thud, until the door, with a turn of the lock, finally creeped open. Loona stared wide-eyed at the sight that she was met with, and what a confronting sight it was.

What stood in the now wide open doorway was, to put it in an almost Shakespearean sense, a bear of a man; a tall, broad, hulking, almost completely hairless specimen of a bear-like man who was nearly a caricature. If she had merely been told about the description of this uncle of Svetlana's, Loona would've believed it to be 'bullshit' — but 'bullshit' it definitely wasn't. It was specimens like these which made bears the unofficial official Russian national animal. His physique tucked behind the blue singlet and cargo shorts he wore could be described as "skinny-fat"; while his calves and biceps in his arms and legs were stalwart in tone, and firm like cast iron, what was once an equally as toned stomach had transformed into a pudgy beer gut. A tattoo of a sword and rifle crossed over each other was engraved in black ink on his right forearm, accompanied by a phrase written in Cyrillic directly underneath. Most daunting of all to Loona was his face; his face engraved with a crude chisel upon his square-jawed head told a harrowing story. Two deep trench-like scars ran across his face, the first from his nose to his right cheek, and the other running upwards from his lower right jaw up to his forehead, a black eyepatch resting in place of where an eye should be. Though he had not a single hair upon his crown, an impressively thick brown mustache rested beneath his scarred nose which made him look like an ocean-hardened walrus, and his eyebrows were as sharp as knives.

Any courage that Loona had against Svetlana's uncle had left right then, unable to take her bewildered gaze off the sheer mass of man. *"Holy fuck..."* the goth whispered under her breath, being mindful to not let the bear hear her shock.

Luckily for her he hadn't, his attention turned to the young woman who had just knocked. In a low, guttural drawl, the beast of a figure rumbled; *"Rrrgh... Ough.* It's you, Svetlana. So it's you."

A little smile beamed on Svetlana's face; "Hey, Uncle Niki! How are you doing?"

"Mmmmmgh. … The same," 'Uncle Niki' wheezed in broken English and scratched the scarred side of his face, his uncovered and presumably remaining eye sluggishly blinking in exhaustion; "Nothing changes. … So, what, what brings you here?"

"Oh, yanno, I was in the area and I thought I'd come see you," Svetlana chimed; "Have you, um… hey, did you remember the invite I gave you a week back? The one for that- uh, thing at church?"

Try as she might to engage in bonding, it seemed that Svetlana's question had hit a brick wall, none of the words seemed to process with the bulky man who waved in and out of consciousness. That, along with the lingering smell of the hardest liquor she had ever smelt, made Loona realize that 'Uncle Niki' was drunk — very drunk. 'It's a miracle that he's even standing' was the thought which crossed the hellhound's mind who was no foreigner to being intoxicated, her knowledge in telltale signs of severe drunkenness mostly from her own experiences. One thing which Loona had learnt was to not look severely drunk people in the eye; a mistake which she had just made. 'Uncle Niki' noticed the strangely dressed woman beside his niece, turning his waning attention to her and analyzed her carefully. "Who's this," he gurgled simply with a hard, drowsy eyelid stare.

"Err- Oh! This is Loona," Svetlana introduced; "She's tagging along with me. I met her at church a few nights back."

An incoherent string of throaty mumbles, not even words, tumbled out of the pot-gutted man, looking as though he was judging every single minute detail of who and what Loona was, and what she was wearing. The 'bear' let off the hint of a sneer after staring at Svetlana's "extra baggage" for a little bit, pivoting his head back to Svetlana and gargled; "Very strange person to go to church. What is she?"

"What do you mean, as in…?"

"As in motive. What's her motive," Uncle Nikita slurred bluntly, gripping his big grizzled right hand up against the doorframe, letting out a breath like an irritated bull. Loona glanced at the man's hand and noticed that its dorsal was home to another tattoo; this one was of a hammer and sickle surrounded by a wreath, along with a string of letters which simply read ***"CCCP"***. A closer look also revealed to Loona that the man of seldom any words was missing a portion of his index finger, reducing it to a singular-boned stub.

"Nono, there's no motive," Svetlana shook her head, trying to smile to offset the tense question; "She just wanted to come and see, see what we're all about."

"Is that right," the behemoth growled in suspicion, cocking his head supported by his thick neck back towards Loona, and gave her a bone-chilling face. He interrogated lightly, raising his slurred, accented baritone voice; "Is that right, woman? You just looking? Not doing anything… how say… suspicious? Strange?"

Loona raised her hands to defend herself; "Hey, I-I'm just here for your niece. Nothing more," she tried to alleviate the uncle's worries, an effort which she already thought would be in vain. Just the

way this pure beast of a man watched her sent all sorts of red flags blaring in her head, it was almost too much for her to withstand.

"You're here for my niece," the bear slowly repeated, his head moving up and down in a smooth, unnerving nod, his remaining sharp eye not once leaving Loona's pale face; if the bear's eye was a literal dagger, the hellhound would be bleeding profusely like a stuck pig. The subject to the unwavering stare glared right back, trying with all of her physical and mental strength not to make any rash decisions concerning this very intimidating figure. His evil-eyed infatuation with letting Loona know her place loud and clear ended when he turned back to Svetlana and wheezed with a gross sort of cough; *"Urrgh-Ahum! Mff...* So what you want with me, huh? You know I don't like visitors, especially, uh… from strangers, like *'thing'* over there." Loona scowled at the thinly-veiled insult, though held her tongue before she could strike back; a fatal would-be mistake in hindsight.

"Ah! Well— *uh..* That was-*eh*, what I was… gonna… hm." Like the dying flicker of a light, Svetlana's courage grew dimmer as she stammered, the look of deep disapproval from a figure which she had held high regard for causing something deep inside to die with little struggle.

In an almost disgusted look, the bear raised his upper lip and gargled; "Is this what mother teaches you, Svet," he scolded; "To follow me around, pester me, come running to "poor old Uncle Nikita" with gnilaya malen'kaya shlyukha over there, and hope that changes mind? Foolish, Svetlana! FOOLISH!" His eye darted sharply back to Loona, noticing the deep bear-teethed scowl she had, her face brewing with a slight tinge of red. Nikita insidiously chuckled in a low, throaty tremor, smirking from underneath his unbelievably walrus mustache; "And you going to do what, shlyukha? Going to fight me?"

The eerily silent Loona remained mute, though her devil's eye which spoke a million wrathful words burned deep into the hostile drunkard. She knew not to satisfy him with a response, knowing full well that is exactly what he wanted; a two-on-one casus belli to justify even more nastiness.

"What I thought," the bear known as 'Nikita' hummed, then cocked his scarred head back to Svetlana and rumbled; "You are to leave. I have no wish to speak to you. Leave now." He slithered back into his dark brick cave absent of light, and shut the door right in his niece's now meek face.

A disgusted growl came from Loona before she focused on Svetlana, who held within her eyes a look of sheer disappointment. The fuming hellhound forfeited her wrath and replaced it with concern, though she was afraid to speak after what had crashed and burned like a tinderbox before her. Just as Loona had worked up the courage to begin offering words, Svetlana put up a hand to shush her and uttered; "He always does this."

“That? And you tolerate it??” Loona repeated in disbelief; “What the actual fuck, Svet, listen to what he just said to you! I’ve never seen anything like it, and at his own fucking niece! This is how he repays you?! If I were you, I would’ve—”

“I don’t care, Loona,” Svetlana croaked in the middle of Loona’s rant, weakly shaking her head; “I still care about him. But I just… I don’t understand him, like at all.”

“What— But he just— You…” Every rebuke which tumbled haphazardly out of Loona’s gaping mouth died the moment they saw light, so she stopped trying. She knew then that for whatever daft reason this stubborn niece would continue to love the abusive figure, though the hound found it incomprehensible, if not stupid. But what Loona personally thought didn’t matter; a person who she was somewhat cordial with had been hurt severely. Having given up on trying to convince Svetlana, instead Loona offered; “You wanna hang out somewhere? I’ll get something for you.”

She was silent from her despondent state, but eventually Svetlana gave off a nod and a quiet *“yeah”,* then went with Loona back down the staircase. The low-spirited niece was tempted to glance back at “Room 25”, but before she could, her only form of company and emotional support tapped her arm. “Hey,” Loona said softly; “He’s not worth it.” Svetlana huffed and followed the disguised hound back down to the car, the pair of them swallowed by a strict, unshakable silence. Although she was tight-lipped about it, Loona had a silently brewing desire to outright confront this ‘Uncle Nikita’, as much of a pathetic excuse for an uncle he was. A bone, sooner or later, was going to be picked with him, like when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. It didn’t matter about time or place to Loona, only that it would eventually happen — the “righteous” bone in her body would see that through.

A dozen black-uniformed figures sat on either side of a long boardroom table, sitting in the midst of a darkened room. Cigarette and cigar smoke alike hung around in patchy wisps, and almost exclusively around those who had a cigar still in between their fingers. Not an utterance was heard as none dared to speak, at most a faint whisper to make note of something or rather. Playing faintly in the background of the room was a vintage gramophone, an orchestral song which was decades old crackling and buzzing through the pristinely golden floral-patterned horn. All twelve seated members of the dozen-strong congregation, all of which were sinners smoking and chattering quietly away, awaited an arrival. Two particular tunic-dressed individuals present, both of whom sat on either side of an absent chair at the far end, were particularly eager to speak. One was square-jawed and with a deep red complexion with twisted ram’s horns jutting out his head, and the other’s face was blacked out, the only features being two uneven red eyes.

“Zhese meetings, Luitpold,” the chisel-jawed sinner muttered, looking down the table at everyone present; “Nozhing but a vaste of time.”

“Ah, I wouldn’t be so certain,” the uneven-eyed sinner replied, rolling the cigarette pinched between his spindly fingers; “He wouldn’t call a meeting like this for nothing at all. He has a big responsibility, don’t you know?”

“As he tells us… *constantly,”* the instigator of the conversation noted; “Who voulda zhought that Herr Ritter, just a little platoon commander eighty-five years ago, vould be at zhe right hand of who else but zhe King of Hades?”

“Must’ve seen something in him,” the sinner named ‘Luitpold’ supposed; “Probably his persistence. Might have nagged him to death, and that’s what convinced the devil to choose him — to finally shut him up.” Cigarette smoke tumbled out from his blackened face as he hissed with self-contained laughter.

“Errr… Vhatever it is, it’s certainly gotten to his head,” the red sinner critiqued; “Alvays valks around vith his vhite uniform, keeping a close eye on everyzhing and everyone — even *us!* Ve vere higher-ranking zhan him in life, vhat gives him ze right to be suspicious of *us??”*

To this Luitpold’s face, or lack thereof, grew almost nostalgic and yearning; “That was then, Walter,” he said with a regretful shake of his head; “Those days have long since passed us. We’re all equal as the damned down here, as they say.”

“Oh come on, Luitpold, vhere is zat old pride in yourself,” ‘Walter’ questioned; “You vere up in zhe world decades ago! Now you’re under zhe command of some lowly, propped-up Rhinelander? I cannot believe you, sir, I cannot.”

“And nor did we believe Ritter would be favored by Lucifer,” Luitpold added then broke into a chesty cough. He pulled a fresh flavored cigar out from within his black woolen tunic, playing around with it like one would with a pencil. Before he tucked the confectionery back into his uniform, the sinner offered it to his comrade ‘Walter’, who declined with a simple wave of his hand. “Besides,” Luitpold added after clearing his throat; “We haven’t had a meeting like this in a while. From the tone of things, it sounds serious.”

“Inspektor Ritter on zhe case,” the deep red sinner joked; “Like zhat Englander, Sherlock Holmes. Vasting resources on some… vhat is she again?”

"Kameraden! Der Kommandant!"

Everyone scrambled up onto their feet and stood at full attention at such short notice, their backs stiff and arms resolutely stuck by their sides, and the soft, relaxing background music came to a screeching halt. As all heads snapped attentively to the entrance, the double entrance doors swung urgently open to allow for the gathering's staunch and professionalist superior to enter. There he stood; the meticulous, feared, one-eyed *'White Death'* as some had grown accustomed to call him amongst his circle, the invisible heels of his jackboots clicking against the gray-tiled floor as we waltzed in with grace, with a leather file underneath his wing. Soon as he came to a halt after entering, everyone in the room greeted him with a quiet and feared nod. 'Der Kommandant' nodded back; "wie Sie waren, meine Herren," he commanded calmly, and so everyone at attention promptly sat back down like a dog to their master. He paced rhythmically up to the front of the lengthy boardroom table and claimed the empty seat, still standing like a cast statue.

The 'White Death' opened the leather folder and opened it, then placed it on the immaculate varnished table's surface. He lifted his singular red eye back up at everyone, and said in a soothed, disciplined voice; "Thank you all for coming, meine Herren, to this meeting. I am aware that this was called at such short notice, which I would like to apologize for, and I must express my gratitude to you all for being stalwart with your attendance." He paused a moment to let his authoritative words sink in, before going on to add; "As all of you know, we do not have many meetings of this nature. The last occasion when such a meeting was convened was twenty-seven years ago, on the issue of reining in the Overlord Crime Epidemic. By that meeting's adjournment, we had agreed to commence 'Operation Spring Meadow', which due to our staunch resolution and commitment to duty was an overwhelming success. That operation lasted no more than two weeks, proving to Lucifer our effectiveness in enforcing his law. As a result, he integrated us as an organization into his governing body."

The audience remained silent even when Ritter paused, flexing his fingers within his black leather gloves.

Knowing that he had full command of the room, Lucifer's eyes and ears continued; "Today, kameraden, on this day, I'm afraid that we face another anomaly of interest. Understand that the information provided to me is only preliminary, und thus far nothing is for certain, but I felt the need in recent days to bring it forth to this committee, in case further action is needed in future. According to the Sin of Greed, via the King of Hades, there is a young woman suspected of collaboration. She might have been in contact, and may still be maintaining contact with enemies of the State. As a result, I have been assigned the duty of keeping an eye on her." For the first time since the commencement of the meeting, a hand was raised from further down the table. Ritter noticed this, and thus said with a brief inflection of impatience; "Yes, Ulrich."

“So you mean to tell us you’ve called a meeting to discuss just a… a woman,” Ulrich questioned perplexedly, obviously not understanding the gravity of what was being discussed, not that anyone else did besides the ‘Kommandant’.

Ritter stared blankly at the questioner and nodded; “Indeed I have, Herr Ulrich, and for good reason. Last week, Herr Mammon and this Fraulein got into an altercation, which resulted in Herr Mammon having his hand burnt. As I understand it, said hand is in a gauze and is receiving constant treatment. Kameraden, understand that Sins do not burn easily, especially not of this magnitude. … She might be a dissenter.”

A short flurry of muttering voices rumbled across the boardroom table, only ceasing when someone else spoke up; “Do we have a description of this woman?”

“We do,” Ritter confirmed and referred to his open leather folder; “As of the past three days, I have been gathering information on her, anything which could help us in understanding who she is, and her intention of getting involved in things she shouldn’t.” With one hand the singular-eyed sinner picked up the folder by its sturdy spine, holding the entire thing in one hand with ease, and began to inform his committee through the means of recital; “What I know for certain is that her name is Loona, she is a hellhound, twenty-two years of age, is employed at a business in inner Imp City called ‘Immediate Murder Professionals’, and her adoptive father goes by the name of ‘Blitzo Buckzo’. Unfortunately, that is where the certainty ends. There seems to be a considerable gap in her history, the earliest record relating to the Fraulein being from twenty-two years ago. However, there is strangely enough a fifteen-year gap between her birth certificate, and the submission form provided by the orphanage she was sent to. According to her birth record, Loona was born to an unnamed mother and an unnamed father, and was one of a litter of five children; two brothers, two sisters. There were, how do I say… *complications,* with her siblings. Both brothers came out as stillborns, one sister was found to have what is known as “Water Puppy Syndrome”, and the other died of an unknown cause an hour after birth. Only Loona survived, as evident.”

Hushed chatter went about the room, but quickly fell silent when Ritter began speaking again; “As of right now, I am only in charge of monitoring Fraulein Loona’s behavior. I last checked with her on Monday, and I will be seeing her again on Friday, three in the afternoon sharp. Again, I would like to stress that all of this is precautionary. But in saying this, meine guten Kameraden, I must warn you all; be prepared. If indeed we need to formulate and then enact a plan, we mustn't be caught unawares.” As he said this, Ritter noticed that a sort of “chinese whispers” was being played along the left side of the boardroom table, starting from the opposite end of the table, and at the point of noticing was now only five seats away from him.

The ‘Kommandant’ took keen notice of it until it finally reached “Walter”, who stood up from the table and told his superior in a whisper; “Herr Kommandant, I wish to inform you…”

Downwards

A promise had been duly fulfilled when Loona bought the despondent niece something to drink, her appetite having been lost since the incident. Having set her hatred aside for the “disheveled old prick” as she had privately dubbed him, Loona’s mind was fixated on one thing only; making sure that Svetlana’s day wasn’t completely ruined. What had happened pissed the hellhound off to no end; that old, rotten bastard had taken an olive branch fruitful with its namesake, and cast it into the inferno which burned in place of where a soul should be, if he even had one to begin with. For all Loona knew, maybe “the bear” had always been some sick, twisted old prune, spitting vitriolic insults into the faces of everyone and anyone he met. As the hound had duly explained to Svetlana, maybe he was just one of those men who were constantly hateful of the world around him, with any chance of moving away from such a cruel and pathetic approach next to impossible. But that was thankfully in the past — a very recent past spanning an hour, but in the past nonetheless.

“Yeah, studying can be like that, Svetlana,” Loona remarked as she worked on her little art project, her legs crossed while having listened to her company talk about something else. They had both opted to settle down outside some coffee place Svetlana was a regular at, sitting around a small round table only a few minutes drive away from where disaster had struck. “I haven’t ever studied for shit,” Loona added; “But I can imagine what it feels like, sure.”

“Oh, it’s awful,” Svetlana complained and rolled her eyes, taking a second to sip her drink before rambling on; “And they expect you to stay up hours into the morning, and *then* come in a few hours after that! It’s like they *want* us to die!”

This made Loona chuckle a little; “The perfect crime. Who knows, people have probably tried that.”

Svetlana paused for a meager second, then blinked; “Tried what?”

“Yanno, to— kill people with exhaustion,” Loona explained with a flap of her hand; “Burn them out until their bodies just can go on anymore.”

“That’s… morbid,” the girl in her gray hoodie half-chuckled; “Ha- You’re morbid, Loona, oh my God!”

“Oh trust me, I know,” the disguised hound smirked widely; “You wouldn’t believe how much morbid shit I read and watch, it’s wild!” A morbid sparkle flashed in Loona’s eyes when she remembered a particularly ghoulish story, and so got on with retelling in a flare of enthusiasm; “Ohoh, hey! Listen to this one. I’ll tell you about this one guy I read about, got himself wedged up in this cave he found. Thought he could squeeze himself through this very narrow and tricky part, then boom! Stuck, arms pinned by his sides, unable to move. Worst part about it? He and his buddies were the first to discover it, and they’re like five miles underground.”

“Oh- Sh— oh *God*,” Svetlana reeled back in her seat and grimaced hard; “That’s— no. Okay, like, I don’t get spelunkers! Why risk your lives like that to explore some dark, damp hellhole? You’re not gonna find anything worth dying for down there, so what’s the point??”

“Tsh! I dunno. Ask them,” Loona replied in a sardonic snicker as she continued to draw, letting off a lazy shrug which couldn’t really be considered as one; “They’re the ones willingly crawling to their graves. They wanna put themselves at risk like that, so-uh… s-so be it. *Shit, how do I draw this…*” The preoccupied hound’s voice petered off and her sentence ended clumsily, her pencil flicking against the paper as even more distinct facial features materialized in two-dimensional form.

The inevitability was that Svetlana would again take notice of Loona’s little pet project, and that’s exactly what she did, peering over at the slowly developing mugshot with interest as discreetly as she could. Another inevitability was for Loona herself to take notice of said interest, and that too is exactly what happened. The artist stopped and flicked her eyes upward, noticing the second pair of pupils peering over curiously at her craft, like a cat entertained by paltry movement. Loona cocked the side of her mouth into a half-smile and remarked degradingly; “It’s not that good, calm down.”

But Svetlana, almost in shock over the self-critique, gave Loona a look of sheer disbelief; “Uh, yes it is?? Come on, Loona, that actually looks sick! It looks just like him! Well, if he didn’t have hair, or a mouth, or a ne— oh wait, there’s a neck.”

A grin made itself home on Loona’s lips who too was on the cusp of chuckling; “Hey, I’ll get to that! Just focusing on getting the ears and eyebrows right. Think I’ll do some shading, too, give it a bitta depth.”

A short monotoned hum was Svetlana’s vocalized response who held her chin in interest, causing Loona to begin considering whether her artistic abilities were actually that good — Maybe she wasn’t as terrible at this as she thought. To give herself some credit where it was due, this was Loona’s first piece which looked impressively, if not scarily close to the real thing, especially the eyes which she had spent a good fifteen tedious minutes on. Furthermore, the more that the increasingly prideful hellhound reflected on her feat, the more she realized it was beginning to look

like one of those black-and-white antique photographs she had seen here and there, especially with the meager shading she had included under and around the portrait's eyes. The layman artist with the pen name of 'Loona', a signature which she had just scribbled cursively in the page's top right for good measure, began to wonder just how far she could go with this.

As she finished off the eyebrows with a few miniscule flicks, Loona moved on to the lower half of the face and quipped; "Well shit, never thought this was anything of worth! Could even sell it if I wanted to, whaddya think?" The smile perched beneath her nose faded in its luster when she didn't hear a response back. Cautiously Loona's eyes lifted from the page to check on Svetlana, only to find her looking spacey with an indiscernible, almost lost expression. It was small wonder to the hellhound what exactly was on the human girl's mind; "You're thinking about him, aren't you," Loona implied with sensitivity, her voice hushed and tempered into a sensitive hum.

As feared but otherwise expected, Svetlana let out a tiny, hesitant dip of her head.

Again the feeling of contempt made itself known in Loona's head as it simmered, though she kept it hidden and focused solely on the victim. Now it wasn't as if Loona was any form of a natural in 'being there' for people, at least for the wider public who only ever saw that sulky, ill-tempered side to her which in all fairness had kept her alive for so long. In saying this, on the other hand, the hound did possess empathy which only came out in specific situations and for specific people. And empathy is exactly what Loona showed, setting aside her pencil for the time being to focus solely on the girl sitting across from her. With a short, sharp exhale, Loona consoled; "Svet, hey. Hey c'mon now, stop thinking about him. He's not worth it, remember that."

"Hm! Yeah, it's easy for you to say, isn't it," Svetlana was quick to snap, taking Loona aback in the process; "You're not the one related to him."

"No, okay, I get that," Loona affirmed in the best of intentions, making sure to maintain eye contact with her hand placed flat towards the troubled girl; "But thinking about what he said will ruin your day further. He was an asshole to you! So yanno, set him aside for at least the rest of the day, try to forget that it ever happened. You've got me here as well, so you're not alone in this."

"But do you know what it feels like," Svetlana queried sadly, the look in her eyes showing to Loona that she was definitely in strife; "To have your uncle — your own *uncle* — spit in your face like that? I-I don't get what's wrong with him, like what have I ever done to him?"

"Look- Some people don't need a reason to be dicks," Loona tried to explain, proffering to hold the distressed niece's hand; "They just are. It's not your fault, so don't go around thinking that it is,

okay? ‘Cause it’s not.”

With a slight glimpse Svetlana noticed the hand, staring meekly at it for a second before ignoring it altogether, instead running both hands through her hair. Loona in turn retracted her hand, placing it back down against the table top. She sighed hopelessly; “I don’t think I remember a time where he wasn’t like this in some form.”

This gave Loona an appetite to prod; “Wh- How do you mean? As in, when he wasn’t an assho—”

“Stop calling him that, please,” was Svetlana’s abrupt response, making Loona promptly shut up. Despite the insult from the hound to someone she cared about, Svetlana confided; “But… Yeah, as in… I don’t remember a time when he *wasn’t* all reclusive and angry like this.” The concerned hellhound watched as the sadly reflective young woman held the tip of her glass and swished it around gently, watching the liquid concoction inside swirl around in a miniature whirlpool. Loona in her moment of silence figured that’s exactly what was happening in the human girl’s head; a swirling, twisting, confused flurry of emotions and contemplation. A sad familiarity came to the hellhound when she realized she too felt like that, more often than she’d like to admit. As Svetlana fidgeted like this, she added with her focus on the glass; “Earliest memory I have of him was when I was a kid. I had to have been like, what, five years old? Something like that. It was a birthday party for momma, I remember that, and I remember Uncle Nikita sitting in the corner by himself with a beer in his hand. Even little five-year-old me could tell that something was bothering him, just by the look in his eye. It looked like he’d been to war. He wasn’t “there”, yanno what I mean?”

Loona knew what Svetlana meant, and nodded silently to confirm so.

“Right, so,” Svetlana paused and took a sip for her parched throat, all the while her mutely and attentive gothic listener remained silent; “…And so I tried to go up to him, see if I could talk or say hello. You know, just normal “five-year-old who wants to see the world” stuff. So I try to go up to him, but momma puts her hand in front of me and shakes her head. She had this look in her eyes, too, like she was firm on not letting me go anywhere near him.”

“Jesus…” Loona allowed herself to mutter, almost grimacing at how depressing it sounded. She continued to watch on as the whirlpool of emotions tossed and turned behind Svetlana’s eyes in a horrible slurry, the girl having fallen silent to reflect on something.

With a brief clear of her throat, Svetlana recalled; “There’s only ever been one time where he’s actually made more than half an effort to talk to me.” She squirmed uncomfortably in her seat as she began; “I-It was a phone call, a few weeks back. He had accidentally called me funnily enough,

but as soon as he heard me get excited, he knew there was no turning back. Long story short, I invited him to that party we met at in the end, and you know what he said to me? He said; *"Your God forsook me a long time ago."* He said it like that, word for word."

"He's right on that at least," Loona mumbled to herself with nothing but hatred for the man, a sort of relief valve to stop her from openly insulting him — not that he didn't deserve it. If it had been her choice, and her choice only, "the bear" would've been sent straight to hell, his final state of bitter existence upon the Earth being in a spilt crimson soup made from his own blood and viscera. But of course Loona couldn't just do that, she knew this; she had cover to maintain and a lackluster reputation to keep, as well as the simple fact that outright beating a man senseless in front of his own niece would not be the best optics. With the "relief valve" out of the way, Loona enunciated after shrugging her hand; "I dunno what else to say, Svet, I really don't. Just don't worry about things you can't control. He wants to be like that, so be it. You can't do anything, really."

"But I want to understand *why* he's like this," a clearly frustrated Svetlana demanded; "I've tried asking around, but nobody tells me anything; *"leave it alone"*, they say! I don't want to leave it alone."

In an attempt to help, Loona mused; "So do you know anything about him, like at all?"

"How do you mean?"

"Like, say, his past or whatever. Could be a clue there?"

The suggestion had an effect on Svetlana who creased her brow, the inner intricacies that made her mind tick breaking post-haste into a pondering jog; "Eh… Not much. All that I know is that he came here in the nineties, a few years after momma did."

"Right. Ngh, great," Loona groaned, knowing that she wouldn't get far with this approach. She set the idea aside and again focused solely on her table buddy, consoling; "Look, don't stress. We'll figure this out. If you're really passionate about finding out what's wrong with him, *for some reason*, I suppose… I can… help you? Like I'm not gonna openly talk to the guy, fuck that! I mean as in being here, working stuff out with you when you need." Just as she noticed a faint glimmer in Svetlana's eyes despite her discontented expression, Loona quickly added; "Okay before you get too excited, I'm not gonna get directly involved. Got a little bit too much on my plate right now."

“No-No, I get that,” Svetlana assured immediately, then in a soft tempered way and a smile which defied her problems muttered; “But thank you.”

“It’s fine. Don’t sweat it,” Loona waved her hand, at last paying her personal project with a glance down towards it; “So hang on, you actually think this thing’s good?”

“Yes! I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t,” the hoodie-covered girl exclaimed with renewed energy, her jovial bluster having returned just like that, the partial toothy smile she now wore a testament to her recovering mood.

A profound relief came over Loona; not just because of the compliment, though that definitely helped in the realm of self-confidence, but mainly because she didn’t have to deal with yet another entirely depressive episode, as blunt and selfish it may sound. In all honesty with herself, with everything already going on between herself, Millie, Moxxie, Octavia, Blitz, just to name a few, Loona had felt that she had reached her limit; anything more, and the hound would surely collapse from the weight of it all. After all, she was still new to this whole “helping people out” thing, the memories and experiences of the “adoption centers” where she needed to be selfish and fierce were still fresh in her conscience, even after being out for so long. A big part of Loona figured that she would never be able to let it go. But it didn’t bother her much, to be frank, in fact quite the opposite; it was a part of her, a part of who she was. Why give up a part of what made her, her? A part which had kept her alive? If she were to let it go, and the moment arose where Loona would need it — as was often the case — and she couldn’t muster it up, what then? For the life she led, the idea of her letting that part of her go, to Loona herself, felt impossible. This hellhound was broken, but it was a brokenness which kept her whole.

The positive change in tone rubbed off on Loona who opened her mouth to speak, only to be interrupted by her phone blaring off in her bag. The alerted hellhound snapped her head down towards the bag, then reached down and fished out her phone still billowing its incessant noise, finding that the call was, strangely enough, from Millie. This puzzled Loona, who got up from her seat; “Ah shit- Give me a minute, Svet, I’ll be back,” the hound informed, then shambled away into a nearby alleyway for some privacy as she answered the call. She held the phone up to her ear; “Hello, Millie?”

“Loona? Loona, is that you??” Millie’s voice sounded desperate and impatient, almost demanding for an answer and peppered generously with a thick layer of both anxiety and exhaustion like an overseasoned steak.

Now Loona was even more confused; “Uh, yeah, duh! Of course it’s me, you called my number. What’s going on?”

“Holy FUCK, girl, where the hell are you??” The imp’s voice bellowed, almost distorting the receiver from the sheer volume she was speaking; *“Blitz has been tryna get to you for the past six hours!”*

Loona froze and took a double-take; “Si-… Six hours?”

Millie sounded tired when she snapped; *“Don’t play coy with me, you know exactly how long you’ve been out for! Why, Blitz dragged us back to your apartment to help find you! What’s with ya recently, pullin’ all these weird stunts on us? Come on, just— I don’t care where the hell you are, just come home please! Blitz’s hyperventilating!”*

Something to Loona didn’t seem right with this impromptu phone call; it couldn’t have been six hours, she had barely even spent two up here, Loona was sure of it! She didn’t have time to think about this when another startling voice came hurtling like a wild boar from the background, getting louder and louder until it had completely taken over all other noise — it was Blitz. *“Loonie!! Loo-Loonie pie, sweetie, my starshine!! Fuck– Wh-Where are you sweetheart?? Just tell me pumpkin, tell me who kidnapped you and I will tear their fucking limbs off! I-I-I swear, Loona, I will! I fucking will, just say the word!!”*

The sheer level of hysterical panicking, it daunted Loona who had considered this as nothing more than a secretive day outing, one which definitely wasn’t so secretive anymore. “Blitz! Dad listen, I-… No I’m fine, I— ugh shit… BLITZ, *STOP,”* Loona screamed into the phone, managing to stop the imp’s frantic tirade; “I’m fine! I’ll come home now, I’m just out!”

“B-But where! Where are you?!” Blitz cried out; *“Yo-You wouldn’t pick up, this dumbass phone kept saying you were disconnected! Where even are you right now??”*

“Oh piss on a di– I’ll come home! Just hold your fucking horses, I’ll come home now!” With a deeply frustrated scowl Loona hung up the call and briskly left the alleyway, taking a sharp breath as she strided back to the table. An almost panicked sweat had pooled on the gothic woman’s brow as she hurried tirelessly, meeting back up with Svetlana who was about to speak before Loona interrupted; “I gotta go. Sorry, I-I have to go.”

“What? B-But we only got here thirty minutes ago.”

“I know, I know!” Loona half-shouted as she hastily stowed all of her belongings into her bag, not caring if anything was disorganized; “I know that, but I– *agh*- I need to go!”

“But what’s wrong??”

“Oh for f– don’t worry about it! I-I-It’s personal stuff, very personal!” an increasingly panicked Loona fretted and heaved with her bag slung through her arms, a million frantic thoughts running through her head; “We’ll meet back up later, okay?? Sorry, I… I nee— I need to go! Bye!” Before Svetlana could say anything, Loona marched off at an alarming rate; “I’ll catch you later!!” She called back through bated unnerved breaths, then breaking off into a double-time sprint and the portal summoning spell gripped in her tight clutches, shoving past all kinds of strangers without caring if she tripped them or not. The spooked hellhound retreated into a deep alleyway, made sure that nobody was around, and then after a few hurried attempts and horrified curses finally summoned her only means back home.

She was fucked. She was so unbelievably fucked. There had never been another time where she hadn’t been so completely, utterly, stupendously fucked. She had completely forgotten about the whole Earth-to-Hell time displacement phenomenon; a completely avoidable mistake which was about to put her in a whole world of pain. The words “Oh shit” ran tirelessly through her head like a relentless stampede of wild heifers as she leapt through the portal and got rid of her disguise, her fur-covered brow glistening with the frantic sweat which had accumulated as she hurtled through inner Imp City’s grungy streets. Loona cursed herself all the way back home; cursing her hubris, cursing her curiosity, and especially cursing the stupid idea that she could’ve gotten away with this, all of this, scot-free. Home was only a street away now, the sheer momentum Loona was moving at causing her to skid and nearly hit a pole, only catching herself with a stumble before making the home stretch.

The entrance into the apartment building was now in arm’s reach, but before the frantic hellhound could throw herself in, she stopped and snapped her head across the road. Standing idly by across the road was a jet-black sedan, polished into a fine reflective lacquer which shone underneath the crimson red sky, the windows blacked out with a highly concentrated tint that made determining who was inside impossible. But Loona didn’t need to know who was inside; she had already turned as white as a sheet at the sight of it, and swiftly tucked tail and hurried inside. The second the hound in deep trouble had made it to her floor, she knew she was in for it, as standing guard by the door to her apartment was Millie who noticed her coworker the instant the elevator doors rumbled open.

Millie had much to say, who glared at Loona disapprovingly; “And where the hell did you go??”

“I-I was out, Millie,” Loona was quick to explain as she jogged up to the clearly annoyed Wrath imp, trying to defuse what she already knew was a tense situation.

But this wasn’t enough for Millie, who shook her head; “I guessed that much! But where did you go, for crying out loud! Come on, Loona, Blitz has been worried sick about you!”

“And I appreciate the concern,” Loona exclaimed, gesturing both splayed hands to herself palm-first; “But I’m fine! See? I’m here!”

“Well he isn’t!” Millie rebuked with a raised flare, though she seemed less angry at Loona but rather more exhausted; “Go on, go talk to him! Explain where you went!”

Loona let off a scowl and grunted, marching past Millie to a scene full of an uneasy stillness and two imps sitting on the couch. To the left hunched over like a depressed shrimp was Blitz with his head in his hands, and to the right was Moxxie trying to console him, his arm perched upon his boss’ slouched shoulder. Even Loona felt extreme pity listening to the faint distraught incoherent mumblings of Blitz, his posture miserable like he had just lost a family member. Right as the previously missing hound, now found alive and well, was about to make her presence known, she caught a glimpse of something in the kitchen; it looked like a lava lamp, the way it seemed to wave in and out of Loona’s peripheral like a tide. When the gothic hellhound looked over, everything from her brain to her body froze in place.

There, just leaving the kitchen in a light strut back towards the couch, her aurora-borealis-esque hair flowing behind her like a cloak, was the ‘Queen Bee’ herself. Just realizing who was here, right here in the middle of her shitty little apartment, made Loona’s entire thought process shut down; a mixture of surprise, disbelief, confusion, and fright overwhelming every single one of her senses. All that she could do then and there was stare with a slack jaw, watching as Beelzebub herself bent down and offered both Blitz and Moxxie a tall drink of fresh, glistening beelzejuice. Moxxie accepted the offer, while Blitz on the other hand just sat there unresponsive.

Just as the Sin finished patting Blitz a consoling pat on the back, she looked up and noticed Loona standing there in a near mortified state; “Oh, Loona!” She chimed with a sudden smile, gently tapping Blitz on the shoulder and pointing; “*Psst*- Hey dude, look! She’s here!”

Blitz spun around at the speed of a whirlwind and noticed Loona’s presence, causing him to let out a huge, exacerbated gasp; “Holyfuckingshit— *LOONIE!!”* Like an olympian on steroids he sprung

over the couch and threw himself against Loona, hugging her with the grip-strength of a vice which caught his daughter off-guard. “Holy SHIT, sweetie cakes, I-I-I thought something happened to you!! Yo-You wouldn’t answer your phone, and I tried to call, and—” His words died on his lips when he began to sob, pressing his face against his daughter as he cried tears of joy.

Loona rolled her eyes and as an apology gave Blitz a reluctant pat on the back, wincing as she felt her fur getting drenched with the sobbing imp’s tears. Millie wasn’t lying, he definitely was in hysterics. Now reunited with family, the hellhound looked up at the far more pressing issue; or rather, the baffling presence of Bee. Loona continued to doubt her senses when she asked in a blunt, stumped tone; “Wh-What are you doing here?”

The Sin of Gluttony cocked her head and let out a playful little grin; “Aw, c’mon, now that’s no way to greet your part-ay Queen!” Seeing that she hadn’t humored Loona, who was still gawking at her in bafflement, Bee properly answered her query in her own little way; “Oh, well, I thought I’d, like, come over and see how you’re holding up after that little vibe-kill you had with Mammon. Oh- by the way, hunnie, don’t worry your pretty little head about it! Between you and me,” the Sin partially whispered, placing a hand around Loona’s shoulder; “Don’t tell that hothead I said this, but *preeeetty* sure he killed the vibe for us. Yanno, blood on hands and all.”

“Hm! You can say that again,” Loona agreed with a snort, then looked down at Blitz who was still hugging her for dear life; “Are you done?” Blitz said nothing and merely shook his head, his face still buried in his unwavering embrace. The hellhound couldn’t help but roll her eyes and moan; “Ugh, this fucking guy…”

Bee chuckled at this and said; “*Awe*- hey, cut him some slack, girl! He obviously cherishes ya.”

Loona scoffed, giving Bee a look; “You didn’t cut him any slack that one time.”

“Loona, sweetpea. He was teetering between hurling and being blackout drunk,” the Sin of Gluttony stated, though still keeping good spirits with a little pout on her muzzle and a kittenish tilt of her hips; “You really think lil’ old me was gonna let your dad drink himself to death?”

“Hey-uh, excuse me your highness,” was the nasally shout which came from the couch, both Loona and Bee’s attention been drawn towards Moxxie who stood there in an almost sheepish way; “Sorry to interrupt, but can my wife and I go home now?”

Bee let out an exaggerated little pout and leant on her knees; “Awwwe, you’re leaving? And so soon, too~?”

“Yes. I am,” Moxxie almost snapped with a whip of attitude, the sheepishness he had completely vanishing in an instant. The exhaustion in his eyes and tremor to his voice told the Sin loud and clear that this mere imp was intolerant to her playfulness, and so too did his words; “It’s been a long day, my wife and I are tired, and we need to go so we can *WORK* in the morning.”

“Woah-woah! Calm down there, little guy,” Bee chuckled; “I’m only playing with you! Go right ahead, it’s not like I’m gonna stop ya!” Both Sin and hellhound watched as Moxxie trod heavy-footed out of the apartment, in turn leaving with Millie back home. “Sheesh! Talk about a party pooper,” the Queen Bee giggled in a whisper, covering her mouth with the tips of her fingers.

“Ugh. You wouldn’t believe it,” Loona huffed, returning back to see Blitz who looked just about to doze off, his arms still latched firmly around her. He looked only half-conscious as his eyelids grew droopy, causing his mildly concerned daughter to ask; “You good there?”

“Oh, good!” Bee chimed in; “That must be the three shots of vodka kicking in. Had to give him some to calm his nerves, because holy *shit* was he tense!”

“I can imagine,” Loona grunted and scooped up the exhausted imp into her arms, carrying him all the way back to the couch and plopping him gently down. She covered him with his accustomed horse-patterned blanket and watched him fall into a deep, tranquil sleep, the snoring which followed commencing almost instantly.

Bee shuffled silently over and folded her arms together. She cooed with a small pitying frown; “Awe, poor guy. Worked himself up a motherfucking storm when I came, heard him from the ground floor.”

The words of pity offered to Blitz was like a running commentary to Loona who looked upon her father now fast asleep, his anxieties having withered away just by her returning. To a certain part of the hellhound it made her feel a speck of guilt, knowing that she could’ve very well just stayed put and saved all of this trouble. But so what if he was upset? He was overreacting and made a fool of himself, and evidently dragged Millie and Moxxie back to the apartment to look for his daughter who always came back! This is what Loona thought, dismissing the imp’s paranoid overreaction with a cruel wave of an immaterial hand. And so what if her phone wouldn’t pick up his call? … Why didn’t it pick up his call? Loona stalled on this question, lowering her brow to try and come up with an answer. It registered every single other one of Blitz’s calls every other time, no matter if

she was in Hell or in the Human realm. So why not now? Panicked, agitated, guilty, confused; these were all the feelings that Loona had felt within the mere span of an hour. It was much to process.

She would have even more to process when Bee, in a soft-tempered voice, piped up from beside her; “Hey, can I speak to you for a sec? Just in private, outside.”

To this Loona blinked; “Outside?”

Bee forced out a crooked smile, and shrugged; “Ye-Yeah! Just so we don’t wake up little dude there, I wouldn’t wanna.”

Surely this to Loona was an odd, almost nonsensical request; they were here in the privacy and security of the apartment, why not just do it here in a hushed manner? And it wasn’t as if Blitz was going to suddenly awaken either, being the lead-weighted sleeper that he was as soon as he went out like a light, especially with thrice rounds of the Queen Bee’s vodka coursing through his impish veins. Not wanting to cause anymore of a ruckus than she already had, on top of being drained from fearing the absolute worst, Loona silently nodded and followed Bee outside.

Like a mother closing the bedroom door on their dozing kid, Bee delicately guided the door shut the second Loona stepped outside, using two of her four hands to inch it close from both the handle and the body. Once shut outside with nothing but the company of a puzzled Loona, the Sin turned around and let off a huff; “Okay. So. … Loona, um… don’t freak out, but I’ve been meaning to tell you this for the past few days. Lucifer found out about what happened. He’s really pissed off about the whole episode, between you and Mammon.”

“I know,” Loona was blunt to state; “He sent his minion my way two times already. The fucker’s coming again on Friday.”

“Oh…” Bee trailed off; “So you know about that.”

“Yeah, no shit I do,” the hellhound replied, keeping her voice as low as the Sin of Gluttony’s to avoid disturbance.

Bee let out another huff, this time with an underlay of urgency; “*Huff*- Sweetpea, please, try to take this as seriously as you can.”

“But I am—… what should I call you?”

“Just Bee,” the Sin said gently, an ever-so “blink and you’ll miss it” parted smile rearing its head before disappearing in a flash.

“Right, gotcha. I am, Bee, I really am. It’s creeping me the fuck out,” Loona stressed, placing an open palm upon her forehead; “Like okay, I get it; I probably shouldn’t have responded to the asshole, color me the idiot! But what was I supposed to do, just sit there and take it?”

“Nono, of course not, hunnie,” Bee assured; “Of course not! Hey, between you and me, I believe you did the right thing. But you gotta understand that Mammon and Lucifer aren’t, eh… th-they’re not the most ‘reasonable’ of people. If you need to do anything from now on, it’s to not do anything that’ll cause suspicion for them.”

“Sure. And what’s that mean, what’ll cause suspicion?”

“Just… uh…” the Autocrat of bountiful indulgence was left stumped as she tried to think, but every word she tried to convey died on her lips. Eventually she said; “Look- I don’t know. Just go about your day as usual, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Sounds vague as fuck, but sure,” Loona commented and folded her arms, resting her back up against the wall to give herself a quick moment of rest — she needed it. All was quiet on the proverbial front staged in the hallway of the shabby, aging apartment building, the fluorescent lamp overhead emanating a faint constant buzz, flickering for less than a second before returning to normal.

Both Loona and Beelzebub stood awkwardly in this stillness before the hellhound said; “Agh- I dunno, Bee, it’s weird. This whole thing’s just a weird, complete mess. I’m sorry it ever happened.”

“It’s okay,” Bee calmly assured and bobbed her head, gazing off into nothing before refocusing on the hound; “I’m just here to make sure you’re all goods, not here to scold ya like some douchebag. … Hey, quit looking so glum. I’ll tell you what I’ll do; After this, I’ll go straight to head honcho and put in a good word about you.”

At this Loona managed a smile which crept faintly across her lips, along with a faint nod as she mouthed the words “thank you” as gratitude.

Before silence could return, Bee said; “I like you, girl, I really do. That’s why I came here personally. Heh- It’s not everyday that you find little old me chillaxing in your apartment! But yah, I’m here because I legit care about you, and I don’t want Lucifer freaking the fuck out because he thinks you’re up to something. When shit like what happened a few days ago happens, you gotta nip it in the ass, get it over and done with. If you leave stuff that involves us for too long, leave it to boil over, it can get really, really messy. … That kinda thing’s happened before, but it’s a very long story. I don’t remember exact details ‘cause I wasn’t directly involved, but apparently some guy was getting too close for comfort with Mammon’s horseshit. Not only that, but apparently Lucifer also had some stakes in it because of course he did. And because of that, this guy, he… you know how people just disappear?”

Bee fell eerily quiet for a minute, and although she didn’t speak, the look in her lemonade-yellow and magenta eyes to Loona told a long, long story; one that the hellhound was more than glad to not know the details of. Eventually the Sin brushed her fringe and muttered; “Think of us as a fire, Loona. One big, giant fire — a bonfire, say. We crackle, dance, and glow bright. We’re warm, comforting even for some, depending on who you are. But like a fire, although we can keep you safe against all sorts of nasties like say, the cold… well if you step too close, you can get burnt. Sadly that’s the truth, and the truth burns. … But that’s only certain parts of the fire! Me? Ha- I’m a cold motherfucking log in that fire, I’m safe.”

“Glad to hear,” Loona said quietly with a brief half-smirk, still leaning up against the wall in a casual but reserved manner. Inside however she pondered on Bee’s “fire” analogy, understanding the underlying message that the Gluttonous Sin was trying to convey; it wasn’t a threat, more rather a word of caution. “So about what you said you’ll do, putting in a word for me. You think you could do that?”

“Whaat? *Pssh!* Of course I will!” Bee grinned kindly with a return to her usual friendly, easy-going attitude anyone would find at her parties.

“You think he’ll listen?”

“Oh I’m sure he will,” the Sin embodiment giggled; “I’ll pester him on it, dig into his brain the fact that Loona is nothing but a good girl!”

A willing receiver of nicknames and compliments Loona definitely was not, but in this instance she could tolerate it, knowing that she had a 'friend' in a high place. The Queen Bee had come to her aid at an unexpected time, but a time that may have very well been right. In a cathartic sort of way it comforted Loona, knowing that there, within her sight, might be a way out of the hot boiling mess she had been thrown head-first into. If in all her offered generosity, the embodiment of Gluttony with her exceptional influence managed to wrangle the scolding tempers of both her Greed counterpart and the King of Hades, Loona would have one hell of a debt to repay, but a debt which she would gladly take on if it meant clearing her name.

"*Oop!* Fuck me, it's getting a little late," Bee sang as she looked at the imaginary watch on her wrist; "I'll leave you to it! Leave this all to me, sweetpea, I'll deal with all of this for ya. Just do what I said, and stay outta trouble."

"Yeah, *aha.* I'll try," Loona snickered nervously; "But if you can do that for me, I'd really fucking appreciate it."

"Loona, doll; as *the* Party Bitch, you have my word," Bee winked and placed one hand on her heart and another around the hellhound's waist, swearing an informal but meaningful oath that she would act on her promise.

For once, Loona felt like she had someone who was influential in Hell's mechanisms to trust, but a trust which she remained highly cautious about. Still, it was a good start, in a precarious situation where picking and choosing who to catch her fall was an unaffordable luxury. Who else did she have to choose other than Bee; Stolas? Even he was apprehensive about her for a reason still beyond her understanding, bordering on becoming akin to a paranoid delusionist. And so it was that with one final pat on the back and a word of assurance, Loona exchanged farewells with the Sin who paced back down to the elevator and vanished out of sight.

Just as the troubled but comforted hound trod sluggishly back into her apartment, finally sliding the pack off her shoulders and into the lazy grip of her hand, she briefly contemplated upon what Bee had said to her; ***"Think of us as a fire, Loona. One big, giant fire."*** It reminded Loona of a vague yet potent memory, one that she walked in on the moment she set foot into her room.

Behold a sullen hellhound, barely fifteen, curled up into a piteous ball on her bed with tears streaming down her face, the hellhound's eyes bloodshot into a maroon from her eternal hour of despaired sobbing. Her oversized shirt and long baggy pants were like that of a poverty-stricken hermit's; tattered, dirty, full of holes, the dull scent of poverty assaulting the wearer's sense of smell. Loona, to her utmost dismay, remembered that smell. She remembered it in its odious, disgusting majesty. The depressing display was a result of apathy in a system which considered its inhabitants as mere numbers, a tick on a board worth no more attention than the dust underneath

one's step. For as far back as Loona could remember, not a soul "above" her cared for her, considering her filthy and a lost cause.

That was, except for one.

The metallic knock of the immaterial cell's gate unlocking echoed throughout Loona's room and a blurry, featureless, sooty gray ghost-like figure stepped into view. To Loona who gazed upon it in melancholy, it looked like a bad picture; just a rough approximation of another sentient being. It crouched down to the destitute hellhound's eye-level, causing the poor sullen thing to grow fierce, growling with her lips pulled back to reveal her sharp canines. The blurred finger raised its hands and gently shushed the younger past Loona into a soft silence, and whether it was due to this gentleness or not, the filth-ridden girl choked back even more tears and buried her matted face into her folded arms. In a soft, consoling tempo, the figure asked; *"Wanna come with me for a bit?"*

From underneath the hidden retreat that was her crossed arms, the adolescent hellhound nodded faintly; *"...Same place..?"*

"Same place," the figure made of hazy gray confirmed, with a voice as delicate as silk and full of infinite patience; *"It's no good sitting up in here by yourself."*

"...Can I ask you something?"

"Anything you want," the specter assured softly.

"Wh-When am I getting out of here..? I wanna leave..."

"You'll be out of here in no time. In no time at all."

Just like that both specters vanished into thin air. Their echoey voices dissipated, their forms became nonexistent, and they left no trace of them ever being there, having taunted the one-hound audience with a memory from a time she wished to forget. And Loona, at last as she set her bag down by the side of her room, was finally left alone. She flopped back-first onto her bed with a light bounce and gazed stoney-faced up at the ceiling, both arms sprawled out to either side as she thought deeply. Bee's words echoed in the chasms of Loona's brain as she reached over and pulled her horse plush close, holding it gently to her chest; ***"Sadly that's the truth, and the truth burns."***

The truth did indeed burn, and Loona, who had suffered through numerous deep mental trials and was left with the scars, knew this without a morsel of doubt. One truth was this; her history was like a closed fist; a fist with an iron grip and an unfaltering will to hold onto a number of dreadful things.

This was Loona, this was her — a clenched fist of a woman.

Quiet and nimble was Bee as she strided with celerity across the road back to her black sedan, throwing herself back inside into the rear back seat and slammed the door shut. Once in, she let out a long, laborious breath like air escaping a pressurized chamber, her eyelids drooping from the sudden release she felt of finally being in the safety of her car. In deep reflection Beezlebub mulled over what exactly she had done, said, revealed, and in turn found it difficult to believe that it had even happened. It took a great deal of courage for the Sin to go up there by herself, let alone to make the decision to come to this side of Hell, a place which she never dared to venture for one reason or another. One particular reason hung like a rotting corpse over her head, and it was host to a stench difficult to ignore. In mute compliance Bee's chauffeur started the car and drove the vehicle back to Gluttony — there was a long drive ahead of them.

Suddenly there came the peace-shattering buzz of Bee's phone to her left, spooking the owner of said phone who picked it up and glared at the screen. Though there was no contact name, the Queen Bee knew exactly who it was. She answered the call, holding her phone up to her ear; "Yeah," the autocrat forced herself to mumble.

"Is it done?"

"*Huff*... Yeah, it's done," Bee replied with a severe lack of emotion, sinking herself back into her seat in an exhaustion of one form or another.

"Did she get the message?"

"Yeah," Bee nodded weakly and stared off into space, placing a cupped hand upon her weary forehead; "Yeah, I think she did."

"Do you think, or do you know? We have no time for games, this is most serious."

“Don’t shove me around, you piece of fossilized dogshit,” Bee began to snarl, her temper rising like a burning torch laced with gasoline; “You don’t get to do that, treat me like I’m some fucking nobody. Who do you think you are, huh? I’m the motherfucking *Queen of Gluttony.”*

“I’m not here to discuss your feelings about my methods, in all due respect. I’m calling to make sure you did what you set out to do.”

“And I did, asshole! What more could you possibly want from me?!”

“Nothing at all. ... I think we’re done, thank you.”

“**FUCK YOU!!** Just- Fuck you, you son of a bitch! … You better go easy on her, or else, *mark my fucking words.”*

“...I will make no such promises. ... Good evening.”

Clik!* — *Bzzzzzzzzzzzz-

Velvet Fist

“Sadly that’s the truth, and the truth burns.”

“Think of us as a fire, Loona. One big, giant fire — a bonfire, say.”

“Guess all of us were destined to be cast down here to rot…”

“It’s me hand! I-ITS ME HAND!!”

“P-PLEASE HELP, IT BURNS! IT FUCKING BURNS!!”

“…All because we wanted a piece of that sweet, sweet…”

“Had nothing… Did it for her.”

“Nie! NIE!! Zostaw ja w spokoju!!”

“Think of us as a fire, Loona.”
*“We dance — We dance — **We dance.**”*

The first thing that Loona saw when she awoke drowsily was the ceiling staring right back at her. Her eyes blurry with the influence of sleep focused after some struggle on the dull-gray blade of her ceiling fan, and in turn the temporary optical impairment disappeared. Loona knew then and there that she had fallen asleep shortly after collapsing back-first on her bed, lying sideways relative to her pillows with her legs dangling off the side, and still in her everyday clothes. Now it was morning; ***“05:02”*** according to her phone. A light sniff of her crop top proved that they were still clean, and thus could still be worn for the day ahead — another day, another instance of sitting there and doing whatever to pass the time. There was no way in hell she was going to go back to work, and both Loona herself and Blitz knew this; not after *that.* Maybe someday she would out of the necessity of needing to live, to remain independent; money didn’t grow off trees, after all. For the first few minutes of being awake Loona procrastinated on getting up, until with one silent heave she propped herself upright. The awakening hound looked to the mirror and noticed her bedhead sitting atop her crown in a frizzled mess, akin to a wire brush or a tattered duster than anything like a head of hair. *“You look like death,”* Loona thought and smirked self-degradingly to herself. Another bout of sleep-filled laziness later, the unkempt hellhound kicked herself into gear, laboriously pulling herself back up onto her feet and went outside in a tired saunter.

Trudging past a still sleeping Blitz who snored loud enough to wake the dead, Loona made her way into the bathroom and flicked on the light, the bulb flickering on like a candle in the wind and humming a faint electric buzz. First order of business was to slip out of her clothes down to her underwear and bra, doing so before folding them and placing both crop top and shorts beside the sink basin. With a tear-jerking yawn Loona shuffled to the shower and turned on the tap, a steady cascade of scalding hot water flowing out the shower head which the still sluggish hound trimmed to become comfortably warm. With a desirable hot-to-cold ratio now achieved, Loona let the water run and returned to the basin, removing her bra and underwear before tossing them beside her

clothes, then finally stepped into the shower and pulled the curtain shut. Blissful was the feeling of warm, steamy water running down the length of her body, causing Loona to feel almost instantly relaxed. The now water-soaked hound let out a soft sigh of relief as she got to cleaning herself, squeezing a handful of shampoo into her palm before kneading the *"Hellhound's Choice: Two-in-One Shampoo and Conditioner"* deep into her hair and scalp.

That's when her brain started doing things; it began to talk. *"Sheesh. S'been a rough week, huh,"* the hellhound's brain remarked, being the only form of company.

"Hah- Yeah," Loona entertained it with a humorless smile, a dry chuckle also escaping; "Sure has."

"How do you keep going after all that's happened?"

"Oh, yanno," Loona laughed again, an almost proud grin boastful of her perseverance appearing; "Just keep going despite it all. Can't just curl up into a ball and cry my way outta this."

"But you used to," her brain pointed out without hesitation, annoyingly enough.

The urge to get angry arose within Loona for a split second, before cooling herself down to avoid punching a fist-shaped hole in the shower. "Key words, 'used to'," the hellhound asserted, now rinsing her hair with fingers straining out the suds; "I don't do that shit anymore." The voice in her head ceased for a moment as if to give Loona time to wash herself, moving on from her hair to the rest of her body, starting from her shoulders and chest. But for whatever reason Loona felt like talking to this manifested voice in her head, and so said to herself while washing; "I'm not some weak little pound dog anymore, you know? So quit thinking that. I can fend for myself."

The inner dialogue, somewhat humored by Loona's firm self-assessment, quipped mockingly; *"Cute, very cute. ... Hey so you remember when Blitz said he'd consider replacing you, right?"*

"Mm-hm," Loona hummed in a disinterested tone, focusing far more on scrubbing her legs. "Okay, listen," she then ordered; "Blitz is an idiot at best and an asshat at worst. But he says shit half the time that he doesn't even mean. C'mon you know this, you're me!"

"Mmm, okay," Loona's conscience said in a borderline sarcastic flare; *"Doesn't stop you from pointing out stuff he's said. If you wanna live in denial, go right ahead."*

“Oh fuck off,” Loona snorted at the thought, not taking anything she had to say to herself seriously; “Don’t give me that horseshit. I know him, and you do too. So yeah, shut the fuck up.”

“He is good to me, I’ll give you that,” the hound’s active brain conceded; *“But is he good to me out of actual love, or just because of—”*

“Shut up,” Loona casually interrupted again while gently scrubbing her arms, and after much taunting the intrusive voice finally did, at long last drowned by the warm shower. Having claimed victory over the nagging thoughts which pestered her only seconds ago, Loona zoned out and stood idly underneath the shower head, her arms falling to her side as the steady streams of water rolled off her fingertips. The sedated hound let her head tilt back and gently closed her eyes, entering into a form of meditation to vacate herself of any thoughts, feelings, or worries. It felt good, genuinely good, far better than drowning the stresses of the week with booze or smoking them out with cigarettes. The perfectly warm water gushing from the shower head felt delightful as it rolled from her crown, through her hair, around her face, across her shoulders, down her chest, back, stomach, arms, legs, and pooled around her feet before disappearing down the drain. Loona smiled serenely as she stood there in silence, in her own headspace, in a state of comfortable healthy numbness where not a disrupting thought stirred.

It reminded the gothic hound of a single, solitary happier time amidst a gaping chasm of recollected misery, in a scene very much like this. She remembered it vividly; being in a bathtub full of warm steaming water, a sweetly fragranced magenta soap diluted within it, and hanging upon the towel rack beside the closed bathroom door was a brand new red sweater, replacing the tattered oversized shirt she had come in with. Loona had never known such cleanliness up until then. It felt good. It felt right. She had yearned sorely for it, and finally she had gotten her wish which had felt so hopeless to obtain. On top of it all, Loona in that exact moment, for the first time in a long, agonizing while, felt a resemblance of satisfaction. In that very fleeting moment in time, which was now no more than a distant vivid memory, she was happy. And as the memory faded, and the hellhound woman slowly lifted her eyelids, she still felt at freeing peace, very much like in her memory. She wished, perhaps in vain, that this cathartic peace would last. One must imagine Loona enduringly happy, with a desire for true satisfaction never starving.

Now that she had cleaned herself, Loona turned the shower off and stepped back out onto the fluffy bathroom mat, allowing the excess water from her hair and fur to drip down onto it. In the meantime she checked herself out in the steam-sprinkled bathroom mirror, examining every single part of herself from her thighs upwards. She looked good — no; hot even, at least according to Loona herself in her second of self-flattery, twisting on her toes to get a glimpse of her back. “Curvy,” “Attractive,” and “Irresistible” were all words that Loona appointed to herself, swishing her tail in a delicate almost flirtatious swing as she cocked her hips to one side. Finally the show-off poked out her tongue in a shy fashion before snorting with suppressed laughter; *“You’re an idiot,”* she thought humorously to herself, then added with a cheeky smirk; *“A hot idiot.”* After

drying herself off with a towel and blow dryer, Loona threw her bra and underwear back on and then got to brushing her teeth.

Then seemingly out of nowhere, as if finding the opportune time for its return, Loona's inner monologue made itself known, this time with far more sounder advice; "Treat yourself today," it suggested; "Grab some hooch from up the road." Where her brain was suggesting on visiting was the small liquor store just a short walk up the street, set up tidily on the corner of an intersection. It had been there ever since Loona had been adopted and subsequently moved in, and recently there had been rumors amongst the eavesdropping locals of it going out of business due to a variety of issues, mostly legal. It was as Loona spat out her toothpaste, with the threat of the rumored closure in mind, that she decided to pay the humble little store a visit later in the day; she might as well take advantage of the convenience before it no longer existed, beat the evictors to the punch.

After tripping back into her shorts and throwing on her top, Loona went on to brush her natural disaster of a bedhead into something far more presentable. The thick bristles of the hellhound's brush tugged painfully against her head, the tangled silver bird's nest stubborn in its persistence to remain a wiry mess. Just as the knots finally gave way and brushing got that bit easier and far less painful, Loona caught the sound of careful footsteps approaching from outside, and sure enough Blitz stepped tiredly into view. The hellhound however was more infused with tending to her hair, but did acknowledge the imp; "Morning," Loona greeted in a flat tone, letting out a grunt as the last knot was tugged out.

"Morning yourself," Blitz replied with unexpected abruptness, his words dull but sharp with an underlying moody undertone.

Loona stopped what she was doing and turned to look at Blitz, giving him a face; "Excuse me?" Blitz didn't respond and instead gave off a gruff exhale through his nose, shaking his head in a disapproving, almost ridiculing intention. The hound grew confused at this odd behavior, and snorted; "What's up your ass?"

"Nuh uh, no! Don't play clueless with me, little missy! You know exactly the fuck what," Blitz retorted and wagged an accusing finger; "Soon as you're done in here, we're gonna talk." Before Loona could even get a word in, the imp turned and marched back from whence he came. The now baffled hound needn't say anything as the baffled look on her face did all the talking, and in coherent word's stead was a sharp sigh as she got back to her morning routine. A brush of her hair and a spray of deodorant later, Loona left the bathroom and dragged her feet back to the living room, finding Blitz standing in the center with his arms folded; if he was trying to look authoritative to have an impact on his daughter, he was failing miserably. Still, Loona could tell that she was in for it, whatever the 'it' may be.

Full of impatience which finally boiled over, Blitz remarked to his daughter; “Took you long enough.”

Loona creased her nose, and sneered; “Don’t give me that attitude, Blitz, I’m warning you.”

“Oh you— Oh so *you’re*— You’re warning me,” Blitz began to laugh with a dryness to rival Wrath itself; “You’re warning me right now?? HA! That’s real fucking rich, Loonie, really rich! As rich as a rich prick’s gold-carated buttplug!”

Loona threw her hands out with a beyond baffled face, shaking her head at a complete loss; “You’re not making any— Wh— What the ever-loving fuck did I do for this?!”

Then came the words which hit the hellhound square in the face; “You lied to me!” Blitz exclaimed; “You lied to me, right to my face! Now I’ve got Stolas sending me text after motherfucking text, telling me that you’re going to get yourself so deep in shit, that you’re going to be drowning up to your nose in it!”

“Oh my fucking— Stolas?!” Loona shouted back with her mouth agape; “This is about Stolas, again?? Blitz, he’s—”

“*“Being Paranoid”,* I know!” The imp stole the words right out of his daughter’s mouth, stunning the hound with just how accurate of a guess it was; “I know what you’re gonna say, I get it! And he probably is, sending me all of those texts yesterday, one after a-fucking-nother!” Blitz’s hand shook with adrenaline as he placed a palm on his forehead, obviously stressed about the whole thing. “Agh… I-I don’t know what the hell to think anymore. I don’t know! … I’m not mad at you, sweetie pie, I’m just confused. Scared even! First we got bird brain, then Colonel Klink, who goddamn next??”

“Is… Is that why you got all worked up yesterday,” Loona cautiously asked, her own temper having quickly returned to a resemblance of calm.

Blitz nodded his head with exhausted eyes pinned on the hellhound, then he muttered in a far quieter voice; “You gotta stop disappearing like that. Any other day I’d be fine with you going out, but now it just feels nerve-racking! Stolas is definitely not helping. It’s just- mmph… just sounds like you’ve been lying to me.”

Loona detested the accusation; “But I’m not!”

“So what’s Stolas saying? He wouldn’t just lie about that kinda shit!”

Try as she might to outright claim Stolas has completely lost his marbles, Blitz was right; the goetia wouldn’t lie about something like that. What was the point anyhow, to lie about it? A sinking feeling appeared in Loona’s stomach as she realized her streak of luck, on her part, may have been tried too daringly. “What exactly is he saying to you,” Loona asked with a certain level of caution, trying to find the best way to change her tact.

“He says you’ve been going up to the human realm,” Blitz relayed word for word; “On your own.” The imp’s look remained suspicious, if not borderline accusatory.

The statement hit Loona like a truck hurtling down a highway; Stolas knew. She had known that the prince had known to a certain extent, that was without a doubt, but now she was growing anxious about exactly how much he knew. The ominous question arose; to what extent has his actions in the past few weeks — his ban on Loona using the grimoire on her own, for example — been influenced by the knowledge of what his “lover’s” daughter was doing? Her little game of inadvertently “poking the bear” out of some misplaced adventure was about to result in her face being mauled off, pulled right off the bone in an effortless swipe. Loona was left tongue-tied and she stood there stiffly, unsure of where she was going to go from here. Out of all the options, or what very little she had left, the most straightforward yet damning one was to come out with the truth. Better to come clean about it instead of allowing it to brew into something far bigger, not that it already hadn’t. “The truth burns,” Bee’s voice echoed tauntingly inside the battered inner sanctum that was Loona’s brain.

With every other option exhausted or already redundant, the cornered hellhound let out an agitated breath and asked; “What exactly do you want from me? A confession, an apology, both??”

“The truth, Loona,” Blitz was clear to demand, stamping his foot against the ground; “I want the goddamn truth! Have you been sneaking up to the human realm, yes or no? Look- I’m not gonna get mad if you are, I just need to know.”

“Likely story…” Loona mumbled to herself, wholly unconvinced by the promise as empty as a gambler’s wallet. “…Okay, yes I have. I’ve been going up— to—… to the human world.” Her words were stiff and constipated in the way she forced them out, fighting hard against the urge to keep her mouth shut about what she had been up to. Loona braced for the impact of what would come next, knowing that the gig was up.

In a turn of what arguably could be for the better, Blitz's stern fatherly expression softened, his thin line of a mouth turning into a sort of satisfied smile. "Okay, good," Blitz nodded along; "See? That wasn't hard to admit." The smile upturned into a disconcerted frown and he asked; "So what's with the lying?"

Confused yet relieved by the lack of severe reaction to her confession, Loona shrugged hesitantly and said; "Maybe the fact that if I told you, you'd lose your top because I've been doing something Stolas specifically told me I can't anymore."

Blitz merely blinked at this and asked blankly; "Wh-Why would I get pissed off at you for that."

"What, so… you're not?"

"Pfft— Fuck no," Blitz flapped his hand away dismissively; "Why would I be? 'S fine by me if you go loitering up there, all that gets up my ass is the lying shit. As if I give a fuck about most of that shithead's rules! It's not like I follow them myself, like c'mon, we're talking about your old man here!"

Loona's eyes were wide with a mixture of confusion and surprise, only to narrow when she duly pressed; "So what was with the whole song and dance just now? At six in the morning, by the way!"

"Well when you've got some asshole nagging you about your daughter, you tend to go a little bit apeshit," Blitz tried to excuse himself of any wrongdoing; "…No hard feelings, right?"

But Loona, after having been the unwilling subject of ridicule, had other ideas; "And so you take it out on me. Right, noted," she grunted, shaking her head in disbelief; "That's really fucking helpful, dad, not like I'm under pressure here as well."

An almost worried look dimmed Blitz's eyes, looking as though he remembered something that clouded his mind like a stench-laced fog. For a second he stared at Loona with this same disconcerted expression, the gothic hound staring back attentively, before the father of an only moody daughter sighed; "What is this, Loona? Why are we suddenly under the microscope of Sauerkraut over here?"

For as much as Loona thought she knew the answer — that foreboding, dreadful answer — she didn't want to reveal it, and for a very good reason in no stretch of the imagination. Though the young woman in a strong curiosity streak had no problem telling the truth before, she definitely had trouble now. Instead, Loona shrugged, blew air through her pursed lips, and shook her head; "They're weirdos, Blitz. Like I know what's going through their heads. It's not like we're strangers to stuff like this, Sins and all that crap."

Blitz bobbed his tilted head and mumbled with a yawn; "Uagh- I get that, but on the level of this? This is a whole new can of worms." The imp still trying to awaken properly began to pace in a directionless circle; "Sure, that Bee bitch and the rest of 'em we can predict to an extent, but Lucifer? Fucker's as reclusive as a crackpipe in an alleyway, who knows what made him crawl outta his hole like this. And for us especially, like seriously, what the fuck!"

Loona crossed her arms and thought of a possible cause, other than the obvious. Her eureka moment came and she pointed out; "My guess is it has to do with that whole thing that went down. Y-You know, with the whole Stolas going apeshit incident, maybe it's to do with that? I-Is that what Stolas is saying or what, what's going on here?"

There was a frustrated sneer from Blitz who shook his head widely; "You're asking me like I know the answer. He's not telling me squat, only that I need to "control you" somehow."

"Oh- Piss on a dick!" Loona let slip almost involuntarily; "Like that's ever gonna happen!"

"That's what I said!" Blitz practically agreed; "As if I'm gonna be able to, you do whatever the hell you want anyway, whether I like it or not! … You gotta stop doing that, by the way." At first there was silence between both father and daughter, the pair of them staring blankly at each other. Then out of nowhere they started to laugh tepidly, finding humor in the absurdity of Stolas' stern direction.

While Blitz was cackling because all he saw was the sheer absurdity of it all, Loona's own timid bursts of laughter were a thin and brittle veneer to hide her guilt. She had an epiphany; an awful, bitter epiphany, her tepid laughs petering off like a dying futile flame. Her appetite for going up to the human world had just been obliterated in mere seconds; vanquished, disintegrated, snuffed out just like that. All Loona was left with as a reward for her idiotic adventure was suspicion from the powers that be above her, a consequence for her stupidity and blind hubris. She began to realize just how much of an idiot she was to have thought any of this was a good idea, venturing into a realm that she had no business being in, giving the time of day to those she had no business acknowledging. What was she doing up there anyway, what did she hope to find? There was

nothing for her there, if it wasn't so agonizingly obvious in the first place. Loona had ample opportunity to realize her error, and she had disregarded every single one of them. In layman's terms; she had fucked up, and now she was going to pay for it in full. Nevermind the fear of God, for only the Devil himself had jurisdiction over this foolish hellhound; her judge, jury, and executioner. The reality had finally sunken in, and now Loona was afraid. She had damned herself. All that she could do now was hope for the best; but knowing Hell and what made it tick, she already knew it was a stupid sort of hope.

Something flared up in Loona's heart, heavy and disconcerting. At that very point in time, she didn't know what it was. But it hurt.

At last Blitz stopped his own half-hearted chuckles, his grin turning into a grimace as he muttered; "Heheh, eh.. Ah shit… A-Anyway, uh, Loona. Hey can you… look I know you're probably not comfortable with me saying this, but I… fuck- I might need you to come into work from now on." Loona's eyes snapped wide open and death-glared intensely right at the imp, the look alone telling him that the answer was a mute but resounding 'no'. Blitz groaned heavily, expecting the reaction; "Oh come the fuck ON Loona, just help me out here!"

"No!" Loona protested adamantly, putting her foot down; "Like fuck I am! What, you need me to go kill *another* single dad, tear his guts out, leave the kid to starve?! Oh wait, no, don't tell me; it's a single *MOM* this time, isn't it?! Wooow, that makes things that much better! Way to be progressive, DAD!!"

Blitz rolled his eyes and folded his arms; "Well maybe if you just *listened* for a minute, I would've said you don't have to do field work! You can stay *at the office!"*

Just before Loona could bark off again, she caught her tongue and froze to consider the arrangement. She really didn't want to head back there, whether out of laziness or from shock by *'the incident',* but at the end of the day she did need to make a living, and her living expenses wouldn't pay themselves. Life didn't care how dubious a job was, only that money was money, and the currency life took in exchange was in the form of souls; Loona's was no exception. Her breath became shallow and her voice restrained, forcing herself to make a decision before letting out in a mumble; "...Not like a got a choice. Fine. But you wanna demand I come? That's also fine, but on one condition."

Blitz threw his hands up; "Mhm- Sure, fine by me," he huffed, actively trying to put his daughter first; "And what's that?"

“We’re NOT accepting jobs willy-nilly anymore,” Loona stated with much resoluteness; “I’m gonna start asking questions, the big ones. If you don’t like it, then forget it; I’m not coming.” She watched as Blitz pursed his lips tightly and propped both hands on his hips, almost looking as if Loona’s adamant position was an inconvenience to be carefully considered.

He didn’t need to think long on it, and with a rigid nod of his head Blitz made his decision, throwing up a hand and saying; “If that’s what you wanna do, go ahead. But this is Hell Loona; H-E-double L! All our clients are evil! So don’t be surprised if someone comes in today wanting to pop a cap at someone’s kid, ‘cause that’s literally what we do.”

A scowl crept along Loona’s lips and she growled faintly for a brief second, then silenced herself and affirmed; “Well guess what, dad? We’re not doing that anymore, not if I can help it. End of story.”

“Noted,” Blitz acknowledged abruptly, choosing to cooperate with what he saw as Loona’s otherwise “unreasonable” demands. “Sal’ll keep you company today. Get her to help out so she’s not sitting around on company time,” the imp added.

Loona raised up one eyebrow; “‘Sal’, who’s ‘Sal’?”

“Millie’s sis from Wrath,” Blitz said, pulling on his boots for the day although it was far too early to leave anytime soon; “You know the one, the one with the white boots and the kerchief.”

“The one with the- Ohh. Yeah I might’ve seen her,” Loona thought back, also recalling the surprise text Millie had sent her the day before; “From that Wrath moon festival thing, right?”

“That’s the one,” Blitz replied, letting his left newly boot-veiled foot hit the ground with a dull thud — he had already done his right; “She’s been doing good filling in for ya. She’s learnt quick, you should see her in action!”

“Does she now…” Loona muttered and crossed her arms, narrowing her eyes into a steely and suspicious look.

Immediately the IMP founder and “brains” of the operations knew what the usual receptionist was sour about. He sighed and promptly assured; “No, Loona, I’m not thinking of replacing you. Quit

thinking like that."

"Hope not," the hellhound muttered underneath her breath, the thought of being replaced still distressing her even if she knew it wasn't inevitable. And so the subject of since addressed scrutiny turned and headed straight for her bedroom, considering "the talk" over and done with. "I'll be in here, don't bother me," Loona flatly told Blitz before shutting the door on its faint squeaking hinges behind her.

Soon as the door closed the gothic hound let her shoulders go limp and she sighed heavily, dropping her head to stare right at her feet. With a heavy head Loona craned her head up to eye her desk, the sketchbook laying atop it in an almost enticing way with the way it lay open. The very page which was on full display for Loona to see was none other than that same damn portrait, its completion in all of its intricately detailed glory very much on the horizon. It felt good, seeing something which she had spent considerable time on coming to fruition, bit by bit like a blossoming bed of roses, thorns and all. It felt good. It felt right. A soft half-hearted smile appeared on Loona's face as she sat down by her desk, and finished the final leg of the mugshot to wind down — she would need it.

The hellhound's mood was abundantly drab as she mutely followed Blitz out the elevator and into IMP Headquarters, having been stalwartly quiet the entire way there. Blitz, while at the same time dumbfounded by Loona's reluctance, made sure to let her go too far astray behind him, fulfilling the paternal role he had bestowed upon himself only years prior. Now just outside the entrance door, Blitz stopped and turned to acknowledge his daughter, noticing the shut-in look that she had plastered on her stoney face. "Sure you okay," he asked out of genuine concern, his hand at the ready resting on the door knob.

In response, Loona nodded vaguely, but it was a nod nonetheless.

After staring concerningly at the clearly uncomfortable hound for another few seconds, Blitz finally pushed the door open and went inside, Loona scooting with leaden feet behind. Upon looking up towards the front desk, her shut-off demeanor gave way for piqued interest, noticing another figure sitting with her legs propped up on the desk in the hellhound's stead. The unusual face, an umpteenth imp in an imp-dominated work culture, had wholly made herself at home, with not an inkling of feeling out of place in the way she had sunken into the office chair. The "fill-in" for the hellhound was dressed in a casual outfit; a worn black top, beige shorts, and a pair of full-length torn stockings which ended in her off-white boots. She looked comfortable; way too comfortable. For someone who wasn't meant to replace Loona, this 'Sallie May' definitely had settled in nicely.

With a light spring in his step, Blitz waltzed up to the receptionist in training who opened her eyes to peek at her boss. “He-Hey, Blitz-man!” Sallie May chimed with her southern flare; “Took ya long enough to come in.”

Blitz waved a hand at this; “Ye-Yeah, traffic was ass, couldn’t get here any faster. Anyway, Sal’, I wantcha to meet Loona! Loona, this is Sallie May. Sallie, Loona; Loona, Sallie. I want you two to get along now, as I’m sure you both will!”

But Loona, who had just rolled her eyes, certainly didn’t share this enthusiasm. Sallie May on the other hand was considerably more cordial, clicking her fingers as she sat upright; “You got it, boss-man! I’m sure your darlin’ daughter here and I will be just fine! The second Wrath imp turned to acknowledge Loona; “Ain’t that right, missy?”

All that the hellhound managed to get out was some disgruntled, indiscernible mumble. She was snapped out of her cold glare when Blitz patted her on the back and chortled; “I’m sure you both will be fine! Just keep the place tidy, talk to clients if any come in, oh- and if any trouble comes, rough ‘em the fuck up.” Interrupting the quick introduction between Sallie May and Loona was the deafening sound of a crash in the designated armory, followed by a soft but audible “oh crumbs” from what sounded to be Moxxie. Blitz snapped his head towards the sound and screamed; “What in the blue-balled FUCK was that?!”

Millie poked her head out from the room; “Could we get some help?! Tryna sort out the literal pigsty that’s in here!”

“Oh Christ on a stick- I’ll be right over!” Blitz gave a brief nod to both his daughter and the newest member of the team, before marching off to the source of the ruckus.

Sallie May watched on from Loona’s desk and tittered. “Hm! Sounded like a whole pack of hellhogs got loose in there,” the imp humorously remarked with a wide thin-lined smirk, her accent thick upon her breath; “Reminds me of the time they escaped their sty back at the ranch when Millie and I were just kids. See they made such a mess of the whole dang place, poor ol’ pa nearly blew his top! Oh- ya should’ve seen the look on his face, would scare the devil himself with the way he fumed!” The long deliberate pause Sallie May made afterwards was as if she expected a resounding response from her new coworker, a pause that was very much in vain as Loona remained eerily mute. The Wrath imp turned her eyes to look at the hellhound, finding a pair of narrowed red eyes staring right back at the intruder sitting at the post — *Loona’s* post no less. Unphased by the icy glare given to her by Loona, Sallie May grinned and asked; “You aight there, girl?”

“What makes you think I wanna talk to you,” Loona asked coldly, wholly unimpressed by her “coworker’s” laxed attitude.

“Well you’re starin’ at me, arentcha,” Sallie May quipped back, leaning forward in the chair she had just claimed as her own.

“That’s beside the point,” Loona shot back, waving her hand in a commanding ‘up’ movement; “Get outta my spot.”

The “intruder” remained unconvinced; “Uhh-huh. Aaand why should I do that?”

“Wh— Because it’s *my* spot,” Loona told her straight-up; “As in I sit here. That is *my* desk, I am the receptionist. You’re only here because Millie asked you to fill in for me yesterday. In fact, no, why are you even back here?”

“What if I like sitting here?”

Loona scoffed loudly, physically reeling back at Sallie May’s ridiculous suggestion; “Tough shit! I’m done talking to you, now get up.”

“Mmmm… Nope~!”

“Excuse me??”

“I said ‘nope!’ Not gettin’ up, sorry not sorry.” A provocative smirk spread widely across Sallie May’s face, looking in that very moment eerily similar to Millie’s own expressions; they definitely were related.

This only infuriated Loona, feeling like a vein was about to burst in her head. Who in the hell was this smartass — this *country yokel* — to come here and throw her weight around like she owned the place! She had no right, *as a stand-in,* to come here and act like she had any form of authority, when in reality she hadn’t been there in a whole five minutes! Loona had to practically restrain herself from grabbing the smart-arse imp’s neck and wringing it like a towel, instead slamming her

hands against the table; “DAMMIT, I SAID GET YOUR ASS OFF,” the hellhound boomed furiously, growling like a wild animal.

But Sallie May, to Loona’s further eye-twitching agitation, remained unphased, merely peeking at the hound after having closed her eyes for a second. She opened both eyes and stared at the hound, stating; “Y’Know ya don’t have to go off on me like that. You could always just ask *nicely.”*

There was a certain demanding base to the way Sallie May pronounced “nicely”, almost like she was scolding the hellhound for, like she recalled about her father, “blowing her top.” In an instant Loona caught on to what the cocky imp was trying to do, and so with great effort restrained herself and forced a grin. “Can you get out of my chair, *please,”* Loona pleaded through her tightly clenched teeth.

With an almost coy eye Sallie May analyzed Loona’s fiercely feigned-grinning face, considering her forced plea deliberately. “Mmmm… alright fine, since you asked nicely~,” she smartly replied, finally lifting herself up and out of ‘Loona’s’ post.

With a breathless and reluctant “thank you” Loona took her ‘rightful’ place behind the reception desk, plopping herself down on the office chair with a relieved huff. She watched as Sallie May leaned herself against the desk across from the hound, standing where she had stood just seconds ago. The Wrath imp, after a pronounced sigh, got to talking; “So, ‘new work partner’,” Sallie May chimed playfully; “Whatcha want me to do, huh?”

“Sit there and be quiet,” Loona dully instructed, glaring up at the lively social butterfly who had already gotten on her nerves and kept poking.

Sallie May, who had ignored the memo of Loona’s enthusiasm to speak, pouted and said; “Aw, but that’s no fun. C’mon, let’s talk! We hardly know each other!”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way,” Loona clapped back with exactly zilch replicated enthusiasm, then without another ounce of attention entrenched herself in whatever mind-numbing hot garbage was on her phone.

Try as Loona might to ignore the lingering persistent presence, Sallie May wouldn’t stay quiet without a fight. This time the imp’s voice was more tempered, almost curious; “Now c’mon, what’s with all this being closed-off business?”

“Let me ask you something,” Loona abruptly queried, thudding her phone screen-first against the desk; “Have you ever thought that *maybe* some of us have a lotta things going on in their lives, and they don’t feel like talking because of it? Is that a concept to you, or am I mouthing off to a brick wall??”

Sallie May seemed mildly bemused; “Well geez,” she replied with a slight frown; “Ya could’ve just said that from the get-go instead of getting all worked up at me.”

“Yeah, well! I didn’t, did I,” Loona rhetorically asked and huffed laboriously, an otherwise look of contemplation flickering deep within her eyes, barely noticeable except for a keen eye.

The beholder of the keen eye, in this instance, was Sallie May; “Mm, shit,” she acknowledged in a softened tone; “Looks and sounds like you’re goin’ through it at the moment, whatever that is.”

“You wouldn’t know the half of it,” a less-so annoyed and more-so reflective Loona muttered back. Her anger had near-effortlessly subsided like a retreating curtain, and all that was left in place was this leaden feeling, poached within the chasms of the moody hound’s weather-beaten mind.

Sallie May had no appetite left for quick-witted sallying, instead letting out a very minute hum; “Hm,” she replied, bobbing her shoulders a smidgeon; “Yeah, it’s… S’pose I don’t.” Both of their voices petered off, replaced by the sound of Blitz, Millie and Moxxie clattering around in the armory, followed by brief bursts of curses from Blitz. Sallie paid a casual glance to the makeshift armory’s doorway for a quiet moment, then at the entrance door, then back to Loona to say; “But hey, I don’t think that’ll get much in the of us gettin’ along.”

“Yeeeeah— Don’t get your hopes up,” was the unenthusiastic reply sent the imp’s way, with Loona still rife with caution about this highly extroverted ‘Sallie May’. The hellhound casually rapped her fingers against the desk and said; “So how you finding this place anyway? Can’t imagine it’s your scene. Sure isn’t mine… not anymore I guess, if it ever was.”

Sallie May waved her hand dismissively; “Nahhh, I don’t mind it! Can’t say I love it though. But ‘ey; you were in a rut from what I heard, so Mills got me to come in to fill in for ya. It’s a nice place ‘n all, but it ain’t no Wrath, lemme tell ya.”

“Sure isn’t,” Loona agreed plainly.

“Went killin’ yesterday,” the “fill-in” boasted and sat up on the desk — to Loona’s silent disapproval. The imp, kicking her legs leisurely like she didn’t have a care in the world, pointed upwards with a smirk; “Up in the human world. Human world? Living world?? I dunno, whatever ya wanna call that trash heap. Got to kill this sick fucker up there, literally butchered him like the fat piggish bastard he is — or, well- eheh, *was.”*

“Riveting,” the hellhound again commented flatly.

“Can’t say I’ve ever heard a man squeal like a stuck hog like that before,” Sallie May pondered with a finger against the tip of her chin; “Especially when I drove the knife into his throat. ‘S like he was a huge pig in the vague shape of a human, he sure was built like one! Yanno that reminds me of a time when…”

Loona let out a groan as Sallie May continued to talk, babbling on about whatever ‘Wrath yokel garbage’ she wanted to go on a tangent about. The unwilling listener could feel her brains melting by the second, barely processing the words which tumbled out the imp’s mouth in a relentless cascade, feeling as though she was being put through psychological torture; death via motormouth. Just as Loona was beginning to figure that storytime with Sallie May would never end, her saving grace came in the form of a client coming through the front door. The Sinner, an almost timid-appearing woman with the resemblance of a black, orange, and red serpent, slithered in at almost a snail’s pace. Her pole-straight mane of black hair draped down from her crown, her right purple serpent-like eye entirely obscured by it.

Taking this as an opportunity to get to work, Loona interrupted Sallie May’s rant with a blunt greeting to the sinner; “Hey there. Welcome to IMP, what do you want?”

“Hey, um… yeah, hey,” the Sinner sputtered in a hushed tone of voice, shyly raising her hand up; “I-I’m here to talk about getting someone, yanno- uh… killed. This is the place, right?”

“No sorry, we only save lives here,” Loona stated with severe sarcasm, only to set it aside with a shake of her head. She waved towards the potential client; “Go on, spit it out. Who’s it you want dead, huh?”

At this the Sinner grew even more-so timid, playing with her hands in an awkward fashion which only proved to further test Loona’s patience. Just as the growingly impatient hound looked just about to bark off, Sallie May in all of her extroversion jumped in; “What my coworker was

meaning to say is how can we help you! Who do you want us to instill fear into, say." Loona's mouth was left agape as she stared intently at Sallie May, astounded at the sheer audacity from her to step in like that.

It was at this coaxing approach highly unorthodox to 'Immediate Murder Professionals' that the sheepish Sinner seemed to open up, albeit by a mere slither; "S-So- uh.. I want…" For a split second the serpent fell quiet, only to pipe up again with slightly more courage; "Okay I know this is gonna sound really fucking bad, and whatnot, but I want you to… *kill my mom."*

Sallie May grinned in approval of the result, then turned her head back to Loona to give the stage back to her. Loona, of course, accepted the invitation with open arms; "Aight, gotcha. So what did she do to ya, feed you to snakes?"

"Uh, um– *Eh… Um.* Noo, not exactly," the female serpent stuttered like a car's engine long in the tooth; "It was a planned kinda thing. See, mother didn't want me to inherit her money, she wanted that for my half-sister, so in case I tried anything when I got older, she…"

Again Loona began to zone out as she heard the sinner ramble on, much like Sallie May only moments ago but with a shy, soft-voiced whimper. It took all of the hellhound's inner strength to prevent herself from eye rolling, instead channeling that energy in diverting her eyes elsewhere in the room. Loona's eyes, after wandering for a little bit like a pacing cat, didn't need to wander aimlessly long when she noticed something just outside, beyond the door. There stood the silhouette of a tall figure, dark and spindly, his feathers jutting out around his collar and neck, as well as his head cut off by the door frame which was short in comparison. Loona paused and narrowed her eyes, faintly recognizing the figure standing idly outside. She didn't need to wander who it was for long as the door was pushed open, and stepping in with a slow, methodical waltz, was Stolas.

Sallie May, who was still talking to the Sinner, paused as she quickly noticed the noble — how could anyone if they wanted to? She joined Loona in staring at the new arrival; "Oh! It's- uh, it's you," the Wrath imp greeted shallowly.

Stolas, with a blank sort of stare, said nothing.

"S-Stolas," Loona croaked out, full of confusion; "What are you… You good there, what's with the face?"

Again the prince said nothing, instead stepping to one side to allow *him* to step in. ‘He’ was Ritter, his darkened face and stark white uniform unmistakable, the invisible heel of his boots clacking against the floor as he drifted like a phantom in front of Stolas. He didn’t come alone either, as two armed men covered head-to-toe in a uniform-mask-armor combination trailed behind him, then stood either side by their master. The armed men — or more rather “guards” covered in stark black and grays — looked entirely mechanical in their form. Their heads were shrouded by a steel matte-black helmet which stretched down over their ears and the back of their heads, and obscuring their faces completely was protective facewear consisting of red-tinted goggles and a breathing apparatus; the plate covering their mouths and nose was near featureless, except for the breathing vent dead in the center. They too wore a matte-gray breastplate which covered their entire torso, crossed over by a pair of dark-gray bandoliers strapped across both shoulders and evidently full with ammunition. Their trousers were the least armored, tucked into a pair of jet-black boots with the heel and toe protected by what looked to be stainless steel. All of their faces — Stolas, Ritter — who had none to speak of, and the guards — were all coldly emotionless.

Loona’s confusion had turned into breathless apprehension and she stood up cautiously from her post. She stared wide-eyed at the white-cloaked sinner; “What’re you doing here,” she choked out.

Ritter faintly shrugged his shoulders. “Just official business, as we agreed upon,” he informed in his usual flare; “Thought I’d come see you, get this over and done with.”

“But it’s…” Loona paused and flicked her gaze towards Stolas, noticing that his blank face had an underlay of regret underneath it; “I-It’s not Friday yet.”

“I know,” Ritter said with an invisible smirk; “But hey; no better time than the present, yes?” His singular eye drifted towards the serpent sinner, then addressed her; “Do leave, Fraulein, you have no business in this matter.”

“Leave? B-But I was—”

“He asked you to leave,” Stolas quickly interrupted, his usual characteristic tone of voice absent, and replaced with a cold, calculated drone. Truly the sinner had no say in the matter, and she recognized this all too well, promptly leaving without another word.

Satisfied that the unnecessary audience had left, Ritter turned back to Loona and said; “I’m here to ask that you come with us. This is an order, a matter of mandate.”

Loona furrowed her brow; “Come with you? *Hff*- Why the fuck would I do that, what reason??”

“Loona, dearest,” Stolas interjected again, looking to her with that same sorrowful look which had grown in intensity; “Cooperate with us, please. I beg you. I-I don’t want harm to come your way.”

“Is that a threat,” Loona began to scorn; “That *really* sounds like a threat. Is that what you’re doing right now, huh, threatening me??”

“Loona, I—”

“NO!!” Loona snapped without prior warning, her voice echoing the sounds of fury as if her voice was thunder; “Don’t “Loona” me, you feathered asshole! You know what, no; I’m not coming with you. I’m not coming with ANY of you pompous asshats! You can leave now, goodbye. Didja hear me?? I said GOODBYE!!”

The sound of stomping footsteps came from within the armory, getting louder with every step; “Loona! What the hell’s going on out…” Blitz stopped a few feet short of where Loona stood when he noticed, to his bewilderment, the goetia prince staring right at him. “S-Stolas? What are you… W-What’s he doing here, what’s going on?”

“I’m sorry, Blitz,” Stolas muttered somberly, doing his best to avoid making direct eye contact; “We have to do this.”

“Do what? Stolas, that the actual fuck is going on, why is *he* with you??”

“Business, Herr Blitz,” Ritter delivered with cold indifference, then with a wave of his hand commanded his imposing guards to make a move. That is exactly what they did, advancing in lockstep footing towards Loona who began to growl defensively, the fur on the back of her neck standing completely upright.

Clik! “Make one more move, and I’ll kill the pair of ya!” Blitz with vengeance in his eyes aimed both of his flintlocks square straight between the guards’ eyes, the pair of them stopping as soon as the barrels were centered. As a father the imp couldn’t care less if they too were armed; if he was going to die to protect his own daughter, then so be it, and he would bring Stolas and Lucifer’s

crony down with him too. Joining in shortly after with their own weapons at the ready were Millie and Moxxie, the pair of them sensing that something was about to go down.

Sallie May, meanwhile, tried to negotiate; “It’s best the both of yas leave,” she growled, also sensing the evident danger; “We don’t take kindly to rich folks threatenin’ us here, let alone rich folks in general.”

Every single party in that room — from imp, goetia, sinner, and hellhound; from sister, husband, father, and daughter — knew in some sense or another that blood was going to be spilled, and the chance of a peaceful conclusion faded into the realm of impossibility. Some were itching for a fight, while others intended not to go down without one. One however tried in futility to prevent it; Stolas, who grew even more visibly distressed, and raised his hands carefully; “Loona, Blitz, please,” he begged; “Please don’t make this hard for us. W-We don’t want anyone getting hurt here.”

Ritter cocked his head with a faint crackle back towards Stolas; “You foolish man, Herr Stolas. They’ve already made their decision.”

With one swipe Lucifer’s ear on the ground quick-drawed his pistol and fired: ***BANG!!*** The bullet cutting through the air at breakneck speed hit Blitz square in the shoulder! The injured imp wailed out in agony and he collapsed to the floor, both of his flintlocks misfiring during the descent! *“GET HER,”* Ritter bellowed to his subordinates, the pair of them following orders by drawing both their rifles towards Loona. The hellhound kicked herself into acting, throwing herself out of the way of the weapons pointed at her, and with one swooping kick she tried to send the masked assailants to the floor!

Her attempt was futile. Before Loona knew it, amidst a cacophony of shouts and cries and a burst of goetia sorcery, the butt-end of a rifle came careening to her fa—

“LOONA, NO!!”

THWAK—

Her world went black.

RIIIIIIIINNNG* … *RIIIIIIIINNNG* … *RIIIIIIIINNNG

A crooked, boney, wretched hand slithered across the desk like a serpent emerging from its den, its bones cracking sickeningly as its owner opened his fingers to grab hold of the telephone laying atop his desk. His tendril-like fingers closed in around the phone itself and he lifted it upwards with a low grunt: ***RIIIIIIIII—* Clik!** The King of Hades, with cigar smoke floating around him like a formless veil, raised the phone up to his ear and gurgled after clearing his gaunt, cadaverous throat; "Hello."

"Guten Morgen, mein Herr," a slick, methodical voice devoid of emotion called out from the receiver, the accent unmistakable; *"It's Ritter."*

"Sir Ritter…" Lucifer mumbled almost incoherently, pausing for a second as his voice and mind failed him, much like how the rest of his body had for thousands of years; "…Hast thee done it? Is it done?"

"Jawohl, it has been done," the voice from the other end buzzed, the line absorbed by a static squeal for a second before returning to normal; *"She has been contained. Unconscious for now, but secured."*

The devil felt no joy or satisfaction when he heard this news, only a dull fulfilled expectation which he had felt most indifferent about; "Most excellent," he stated in a low growl; "I commend thee for thy knightly efforts, Sir Ritter. Thou art most worthy of thy bestowed title."

"Ich danke Ihnen, Sir," Ritter replied; *"Regretfully there was 'some' collateral damage, however I wouldn't worry too much about it."*

"Not yond I wouldst to beginneth with," Lucifer wheezed, taking a delicate draw of his flavored cigar still in between his free fingers; "I has't other priorities instead of fretting about a few impair'd inebriates. … And that stargazer, Stolas; didst that gent accompany thee, according to your request?"

"Reluctantly," the Germanic Sinner of high stature added; *"But he fulfilled his duty."*

“Hm. Admirable,” the devil remarked plainly; “Nev’r bethought that gent wouldst, especially ‘gainst that imp’s wishes.” He paused for a little while and let silence befall between himself and his reliable man-at-arms. Without movement of his stiff, tired, old body, Lucifer questioned; “Evidence, Sir. Prithee bid me thee’ve hath found evidence of collaboration.”

“That I have, mein Herr,” Ritter confirmed; *“Though it is only one source of interest, barely sufficient according to your law. There was a written address found tucked in her phone case, obviously of ‘world of the living’ origins. We will investigate where it leads to.”*

Lucifer hummed in acknowledgment, then ordered in a cold, bureaucratic grunt; “Question her upon the hour she awakens, then find more evidence. Upon the completion of this order, report backeth to me. From there, I will decide upon the consequences.”

“Understood, mein Herr,” Ritter complied; *“Good morning, Sir.”*

Clik!

Judge, Jury

Vortex waited patiently with his arms sprawled out along the couch, as he had been doing so for the past five minutes; “You ready yet, hon’,” he called out towards the bedroom, an anticipating smile spread across his snout.

“In a minute, sugar bear,” Bee’s muffled voice replied from the closed bedroom door, followed by a cheeky sort of giggle; “Your Queen’s almost ready! Just gotta— *nff! Hah…* Just gotta slip into this! Oof, it’s been a LONG ass while since I’ve worn this…”

These words alone sent a flurry of heated emotions fluttering in Vortex’s head, exciting him to even higher expectations. He and his long-time girlfriend had always been sweet on one another to a highly tooth-rotting degree, doing all sorts of things which excited and fulfilled both of them; their heart’s desires usually bursting with satisfaction by the end of it. While for sure Bee was undoubtedly *the* Queen of Gluttony, she could also double as a mischievous and teasing flirt for a certain someone. She too had bragging rights on making *the* Sin of Lust himself blush with the things she had bragged about doing, near sending him into a flustered spiral. Still, the pair of them would encourage each other; one specific talk led to another, and now here Bee was; about to treat Vortex to a day he would never forget.

With ever waning patience which gave way to further bashful excitement, Vortex sat fixated on the couch and tried to imagine what the ‘big reveal’ would be. Bee had promised him something special for him that day, the promise alone enough to send his brain into a frenzy; Vortex loved his girlfriend to an unimaginable degree, and the fact that she was teasing him this way made him love her even more. It was only the same time last week when Bee had treated her “sugar bear” to the sight of her in nothing but a frilly purple bra, underwear, and a matching sparkly see-through nightgown with the colorful marvels of a galaxy. Today, Bee had proclaimed, she would wear something even better than that, so unexpected that it would blow his “cute little mind away”.

Vortex, of course, couldn’t wait any longer. Luckily for him, he didn’t need to. His ears pricked up to the sound of Bee’s sing-songy voice; “Okay, I’m ready cinny-bun! Hope your little sinny-butt is ready~”

“Hah- Ready as I’ll ever be,” Vortex boldly proclaimed, then slipped in with a whisper under his breath; *“Mmf- You gorgeous piece of cake~”*

Not another word was uttered before the bedroom door swung open, and coming outside to join her boyfriend was Bee, her footfall clacking against the floor in a rhythmic strut. Vortex’s excitement

had finally reached its peak and he dared not move, wanting the surprise to be as impactful as it could ever be. And what a surprise it was when Bee rounded to the front of the couch with a cunningly flirty look in her eyes. The hellhound on the couch paused and made a short “oh” as he was met with Bee’s attire; whatever he had expected, it certainly wasn’t this. What the Sin wore was not something revealing, but a long black ballroom dress of luxurious tailoring, the collar and short sleeves decorated with a variety of golden floral patterns which stretched across like climbing roses. The very bottom of the dress was of similar decoration, though those patterns resembled more like stalagmites of the same glistening gold fabric. Upon closer inspection, Vortex could tell that these were in fact jewels rather than a mock-up to give off an impression of wealth; Bee’s dress was the real deal.

All that Vortex could to was stare in awe, his jaw left slack by the very unexpected reveal. Bee tittered; “So! Do you like it~” she flirted mischievously, swishing her generous hips from side to side. She was humored further by Vortex’s continued reaction, or lack thereof, his eyes still fixated on the attractive spectacle standing before him. The Sin cocked a grin and repeated; “Texxie?”

Vortex snapped out of his daze like a flash, blinking rapidly; “W-Wuh-uhm— O-of course,” the hellhound exclaimed, still in awe at the literal eye candy standing gracefully before him. If he didn’t know any better, Vortex would’ve very well boldly claimed that he was in the presence of an angel.

Sensing that she had caught Vortex with his ‘pants down’, Bee giggled and swished her hips gently, sashaying delicately towards her bashful husband in all but name. All four of the Sin’s hands were cupped around her midsection and waist as she leant dominantly over her boyfriend, snaking her tongue around her lips stretched into that flirtatious smirk. Bee stared lovingly into Vortex’s eyes, enjoying his bashful expression, before asking; “Hmhm~ You know, I’ve always wanted to try a little something with you, sugar bear.”

“A-And what’s what, sweet-bun?”

“You know,” Bee smirked, her eyes wandering off for a second for effect; “It’s been a long time since, but I used to be a bit of a ballroom dancer. In fact the big-ass gathering space downstairs used to be one massive ballroom! Hehe, well, hence the huge ball in the roof. Couldn’t muster it in my heart to get rid of it, despite the remodeling. Used to be a chandelier, with real candles too!”

“No kidding,” Vortex remarked with captured interest, having not known this novelly revealed information; the dress now began to make sense to him.

Bee nodded excitedly; “Mhm! Used to always love a good waltz, too. I still do, but, well… waltzing isn’t a very “party bitch” thing to do these days. Gosh, I’m old as fuck…”

“Doesn’t make you any less drop-dead gorgeous,” Vortex quipped, a cheeky look flickering in his eyes before adding; “Now know what they say about wine~”

A deep red blush smeared across Bee’s face; “Ohmyfuckinggosh— Tex you massive flirt!!” A barrage of fake punches was dealt against Vortex’s chest and stomach, causing him to go for a deep belly laugh as he pulled her in close. Together they lay there and giggled together, both their faces enveloped in a deep blush and the warmth of each other’s bodies. A soft, flattered sigh left Bee’s mouth and she mumbled; “Do you wanna try it with me?”

Vortex tilted his head with his powerful girlfriend still in his grasp; “What, try ballroom dancing?”

“Ye-Yeah!” Bee nodded; “Just around the living room here, just a couple of minutes. *Theeen* I can fix us up something to eat, drink, and then… maybe something as a “treat” later on~?”

Stars literally exploded inside Vortex’s mind, nearly causing him to completely lose his composure; that was until Bee hoisted him back up onto his feet and held onto his waist, which in turn startled him. He blinked and stared deeply into Bee’s loving yet pleading eyes, obviously wanting to get her way. “So you wanted me to… ballroom dance with you? Is that what you’re getting at?” Bee excitedly nodded. A pained look afflicted the professional bodyguard’s face, wincing as he groaned; “Eheh… aw, shit.”

Bee let out a little frown, placing a gentle hand across his cheek; “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“N-Nothing, sugar,” Vortex stuttered; “It’s just- uh… I-I’ve never ballroom danced before, yanno? I’d love to, absolutely! But-agh, I dunno, I just don’t wanna disappoint you if I muck up.”

The Sin patted the side of her bulky boyfriend’s face, giggling; “Awe please, baby, you’re not gonna disappoint me! Trust me, I *know* nobody down here knows how to but me. But c’mon, I’ll teach you! We’ll do it to music, too.”

“Yeah, but what if I…” Vortex’s reservations seemed to suddenly melt away when he noticed Bee giving him pleading puppy eyes, all four of her hands clamped together to beg him to try. In all

reality, it was too much for him to resist; he sighed, let out a chuckle, and droned; “Mmmm… Alright, I’ll try. But I guarantee you I trip over myself and my big feet.”

Bee was left ecstatic, clapping her hands as she brimmed with excitement; *“Gasp*- YESYESYES, thank youuu!! Oop- Just wait here one sec, I’ll go get the gramophone going!”

Vortex froze; “The… the ‘gramophone’?” The words tumbled sluggishly out through his mouth and he watched Bee skip back towards the bedroom, only to come out a few seconds later with something he had never seen before.

It was indeed a gramophone, a very archaic looking one, made of carved varnished wood and finely polished brass, looking no more than a few days old despite its obvious dated appearance. The wood casing of the contraption was decorated with all sorts of floral patterns and etches, much like its handler’s black dress, and in the dead-center front of the casing was Bee’s very own coat of arms which signified its rightful owner. Matching the overall prestige was the turntable’s sparkling material, what looked to Vortex to be some sort of crystal-infused matte glass, the center spindle too made of the same glistening substance. The brass horn shone as it passed underneath the overhead light, gleaming with pride in its own appearance. And what is a gramophone without something to play? That is exactly what Bee had underneath the wing of one of her extra arms; a vintage-looking record tucked protectively away in its flat case, a series of indiscernible words on the front cover announcing what the black vinyl disk contained.

Vortex marveled at this ‘gramophone’ as Bee set it up on a nearby table, then with a careful hand slipped the record out of its case and placed it squarely on the turntable. She shot herself back upright with a little jump and a smile on her face, holding all of her hands together; “Right!” She clapped; “Ya wanna start, hun pie?”

“It’d be an honor,” Vortex chuckled, heaving his frame up from the couch before drawing closer to his girlfriend, his arms limp by his side. “So, uh, whatcha want me to do?”

“Eheh, uhm.. I’m tryna figure that out myself,” Bee conceded with a grin; “Haven’t done this in a while. Uh, okay. So when the music starts playing, just follow my footsteps and we’ll figure out the rest, okay? You’ll do great!”

Just the look of pure optimism shining in Bee’s eyes was enough to make Vortex snicker, who slowly shook his head; “Really wish I could share your optimism, sugar pie,” he replied hesitantly; “But I’ll try for ya!”

Suddenly a kiss came flying his way, one which was cross between a nibble and a peck planted right on his cheek, accompanied by a soft caressing hand which ran down the length of his side. “I know you will, Texxie,” the Queen of Gluttony cooed gently, nothing but pure love radiating every single syllable; “Okie, let’s start!” With a spring in her step Bee hovered back over to the archaic gramophone and lowered the needle onto the very rim of the vinyl disk. “This one’s *always* been my favorite! ‘The Hills of Manchuria’, or something like that. It’s from the living world,” Bee proudly boasted, and almost as if on cue the track with a loud crackle began to play. It started with a low droning French horn, playing a graceful tune which sounded majestic and had a soothing pace, one that Bee began to waltz gently to; her eyes closed as she lived in the moment, her hands swaying softly like a ballerina’s. She stepped in a slow, methodical dance towards Vortex who watched in awe, watching his girlfriend’s moves form into an energetic prance then a pirouette when the orchestra joined in with a burst.

When the stage was given back to the French horn, Bee opened her eyes to begin tutoring; “Alright, so! Let’s see, uh… so grab my hands like this,” the Sin instructed; “Like that. And now hold me close, like this. Make sure your arms are stretched out like this, make them parallel with mine. Ye-yeah, like that!”

Whilst the help was much appreciated, Vortex was still unsure of himself, lugging his expansive triangular frame around like he had weights in his pockets. “Ya sure I should be this close,” Vortex asked unsurely; “Seems a little close.”

“Yah, of course,” Bee affirmed without a shred of doubt, the orchestral music still playing; “Waltzing like this has to be close. It’s a partner thing, yanno? We both gotta move in time to make it work. Okay, follow my feet, we’ll take it slow.” Before Vortex could put another word in, Bee began to move slowly, the hellhound catching up by staring down at the ground and moving in tandem with the Sin’s careful steps. At first it was difficult and almost resulted in a stumble, but soon enough Vortex was able to mimic his girlfriend’s own movements, indeed moving in time with the elegant track. Bee was brimming with pride; “See, what did I tell you? You’re a natural, honey-pie!”

“Awe shucks, I wouldn’t go that far,” Vortex snickered, his big hands dwarfing Bee’s own which he cupped with the touch of a feather — anything more pressure would surely crush them. Bee’s simple response was to cup the hellhound’s face and kiss him tenderly on the lips, the extended cut of “The Hills of Manchuria” humming its romantic tune in the background. The two inseparable peas in a pod waltzed and swayed gently, relishing the warm and tender moment they were having together. There was no question about it; Beelzebub and Vortex, a mere “commoner”, were madly in love.

“Tell me more, hun,” Vortex muttered in a whisper, his voice low and growling like a pacified bear.

At first utterance Bee didn't pay much heed to Vortex's words, the sound drowned out by the bulky hellhound's baritone heartbeat against her ear. It was only a few short seconds later that she realized her boyfriend had spoken; "Mm..? About what?"

"'Bout the palace, what it used to be like," the newly-minted ballroom dancer elaborated, focusing more on having his step in time with the professional.

"Mmm… 'twas nothing too special," Bee muttered, still with her forehead resting against Vortex's chest, the beat of his heart soothing her; "For years it was one big palace where all of us Sins, the Goetias too and whoever else would gather from time to time. I've always been the party queen, so everyone would come around and socialize here — no commoners, though. I only allowed that half a century ago."

Vortex raised his brows; "Huh. My girl, a classist? Never woulda thought it," he playfully quipped.

Bee let out a mumbling snicker; "Times were different, hunnie-bear, but not much different from now. Lucifer's still grumpy, Ozzie's lustful as ever, *heh*- Mammon's an asshole." She paused and slipped into silence, still aimlessly swaying gently with her 'rock' who held her close. The gluttonous Queen huffed and muttered; "I wish things changed quicker. … Still, at least I got you by my side. You make things that much more bearable." For a solitudinous second of thought Vortex slid his mouth open and was about to ask what she meant, but ended up ditching the question, not wanting to interrupt this sickly sweet moment between them. Instead he sighed with a greater sense of relaxation than ever before, feeling himself drift further into mimicking Bee's slow waltz. After what felt like a whole hour packed into a minute, the gramophone's orchestral tune came to its majestic conclusion, much to Bee's slight disappointment; "Awe, already? We were just getting started! *Goddamn, I swear it was longer..."*

"Shoot, that's a bummer," Vortex breathed with a sigh of relief, glad that he somehow hadn't tripped over himself at any point; "Uff- Just glad I didn't fall on ya."

Bee shook her head and grinned; "Nono don't worry baby, you did good! Honestly really proud of ya. Hell, I'd say you're almost a natural!"

"Awe, now you're just being nice," Vortex snickered, watching as Bee shuffled back over to the gramophone; "Taking pity on big ol' clumsy me."

Bee smiled warmly and looked back towards Vortex as she walked; “Hah! Well I am pretty mercif — *oop!”* Just like that the Sin tripped over herself in a cruel irony, putting all four of her arms in front of her to soften the descent, with one of her arms knocking over the TV remote which lay resting on the couch. Bee landed with a dull *“thump!”* but luckily fell without injury.

Vortex rushed to her side, reaching out his hand towards her; “Oh shit, babe! A-Are you good there?”

Bee chuckled at herself and grabbed the hellhound’s big hand; “Hahah- y-yah, I’m good,” she assured as she was hoisted up; “Just a little stumble, I should be fi—”

“Good motherfucking morning, Hellsidents! I’m Katie Killjoy!”

“And I’m Tom Trench!”

The hexagon-shaped television mounted into the wall blared loudly, giving both Bee and Vortex the fright of their lives. Both of them were wide-eyed in momentary shock as they stared up at the screen, with Bee turning the volume down a notch as the news began its cycle: ***“Some interesting news coming out today from none other than Wrath Ring’s own syphilis-infected waste dump, Imp City!”*** Bee absolutely despised the way they spoke about certain parts of hell like this, finding it repulsive down to her very fiber. She tried to turn the broadcast off with the remote, only for it to fail on her, leaving the talking heads to continue unopposed: ***“In a mind-fucking turn of events which have many scratching their heads, Lucifer’s very own Head of Security and Internal Affairs was seen entering in with two of his own posse into the Immediate Murder Professionals headquarters!”***

Like a tremendous colossal wave, shock and horror came over Bee and she froze where she stood, her eyes now firmly fixated on the screen, the remote slipping from her grip and crashing into the floor. Vortex too glared up at the screen, narrowing his eyes; “Holy shit, that’s where…” Bee silenced him with a weakly raised hand.

The reporter known as ‘Tom Trench’ picked up from where ‘Katie Killjoy’ left off; ***“That’s right! And… mhm? Ooo, hot damn, for real? … Okay, yes! We now have confirmation that an arrest, you heard right folks, an ARREST has been made! Hold onto your balls, folks, ‘cause we also got pics!”*** Behold a picture did flash up on the screen beside the news reporter, a cause for Bee to yelp out with pure anguish. Beheld within the still image was the outside to the ground floor of a high-rise building, taken from across the road. Exiting the building was a pair of who Bee recognized to be none other than Ritter’s own “Shoktrup” riflemen, of which these were only two

of many; a whole clique of Sinners who Lucifer had gotten used to relying on. They had, restrained within their grip, a hellhound with a bag over her head, obviously unconscious and limp within the armored Sinners' firm hold.

Bee felt a multitude of emotions all at once, her posture stiff and her wide horrified eyes unblinking. It felt unreal what she was seeing, as if it was all a stage play; an elaborate April Fool's trick which would end with the talking heads laughing in the audience's faces for believing it. But this wasn't a stage play. This wasn't one of Bee's elaborate party tricks full of colors and candy, music and mayhem, pop-stars and parties; this was real. It made her nauseous, light headed, and despondent. But out of all the things which made Bee sick, it was Ritter; he had outright disobeyed an order which she had given him, a stern warning which would lead to severe repercussions. That man — that sick, twisted bastard — had hurt someone directly under her jurisdiction. It made her angry.

"According to official sources, the detainee has been arrested on grounds of collaboration, failure to comply, and forgery! More charges are expected to be laid upon her by midday today, when select members of the Nine Realms Committee meet at…"

Vortex gawked at the TV screen with utter disbelief, left speechless by what he was hearing and seeing. "W-What the fuck— Loona?? What is she… *holy fuck*... Bee, you seeing—" But the second he turned around, the Sin of Gluttony was nowhere to be seen. "Babe? … Babe??"

The clack of Stolas' talons against the cold, hard mosaic-tiled floor reverberated through the great gathering hall of Lucifer's palace, the goetia pacing back and forth in a nervous twitch with his coattails trailing behind. There was a tense and troubled look on his face as he dared not focus on one thing, his mind a million miles away and submerged with anxiety — he felt dirty. The goetia had done something which he knew was very wrong, but necessary according to his powerful bureaucratic role. But he couldn't care any less about that, bureaucracy and proper procedure and all that nauseating garbage; his mind was firmly fixated on Blitz, and the betrayal he had just committed.

Standing there within the gathering hall with the nervous prince was Asmodeus, his hands clasped by his front with a look of seriousness on his face. He watched Stolas pace for the umpteenth time, before finally interjecting with a sigh; "Pacing's not going to do you any good, Stolas. It's best that you stop now, save the energy for yourself."

“Oh, piss off,” Stolas spat back with a hiss, causing Asmodeus to reel back; “What are you telling me to do, relax? Explain this to me, Asmodeus, you big whelp; how the everloving *fuck* am I supposed to relax under these circumstances? Tell me in your infinite lustful wisdom.”

“You did what you had to do, Stolas,” Asmodeus exclaimed back; “It’s not like you had much of a choice, at least from the sounds of things.”

Stolas began to scowl; “Bullshit! What an utter crock of pure sodden hogwash, Ozzie!” The prince stormed right up to the Sin and jabbed a finger his way like a dart; “If I knew you were going to argue with me on this, I wouldn’t have asked you to be here!”

‘Ozzie’ didn’t take kindly to this; “What the f— what are you attacking me for? *Huff*- If anyone’s gonna be upset here, it’s me! Shit, I had to postpone a function at my club at short notice because you’re stressing the fuck out! Hell, I don’t even know what the fuck’s going on, what’s this about that ‘Blitz’s’ daughter anyway?” The Sin of Lust watched Stolas shake his head in frustration and turn, beginning his pacing cycle once more. Ozzie continued regardless; “Well maybe she shouldn’t have made a forgery of your precious grimoire! Ever thought of that? That sorta thing has consequences, you know that!”

“Dammit Ozzie, it’s not just that!”

“Then what is it! Why won’t you just tell me, maybe we can fix this?”

WHAM!!

“LET’S GOOO!! HA-HAAAAAA!!” Barging his way through the wide entrance doors was Mammon who had just arrived, a massive grin spread across his sinisterly jovial face. His sharp green-tinted teeth gleamed evilly underneath the chandelier lights as he danced and jived towards his compatriots, feeling very merry despite his hand still wrapped thick in gauze. The reason for his exceptional joviality was made clear; “We’re gonna hang that little sheila cunt today, fucken FINALLY!! Throw ourselves a little party underneath her bloated, swingin’ mothafucken corpse! Oh— hey-hey, wait! I got an idea, a good one! We’ll take her body, right? We’ll take her body, hollow it out, then use the cavity which was her stomach as a fucken ***PIÑATA!!*** Mnngh, fuck yes, this is gonna be…” Mammon paused unceremoniously when he noticed the collective blank stare both Stolas and Asmodeus were paying him; they didn’t see the humor in the situation. The Sin of Greed, being the kind-hearted and considerate soul he was, scoffed loudly; “Oh, come off it, you two! This is exciting, ya gotta admit.” Mammon didn’t get the luxury of a reply. He began skirting around both Sin and goetia with his three uninhibited hands behind his back, waltzing around as he

spoke; “Hell, I’d say this is the most excitement we’ve had in years! Shit, I can’t even remembah the last time something as exciting at this happened, it’s like a breath of fresh air.”

“Hm. Speak for yourself, Mammon,” came Asmodeus’ scathing rebuke. He threw his hand out towards Stolas; “I’ve been standing here bored for an hour, and Stolas over here can barely breathe! You seem to be the only chucklefuck having a laugh over here.” The Sin of Lust then finally noticed the gauze wrapped around Mammon’s usually gloved hand, the skin tucked away tightly so as to avoid infection. At that point Asmodeus couldn’t help but ask; “What’s with your hand?”

“Hm? Oh, me hand! Me motherfucken hand!” Mammon grinned, a hateful flame igniting deep within his mint-tinted eyes; “Yeah yanno what, I’ll tell ya what’s with me hand; that *whoremutt* is what’s with me hand, Ozzie! She fucken burned it, and now I can’t use it for shit! And that’s why we’re here, by the way, so thank her sorry arse for this!”

The cogs whirred deep inside ‘Ozzie’s’ head, taking a crucial second to process what exactly had just been revealed to him. Other than the obvious question of ‘how’ — a question which thus far had been asked countless times over — Asmodeus questioned; “So why wasn’t I told any of this?” He pivoted his head towards the goetia; “Stolas?”

Stolas sunk his head into himself, diverting his eyes aw—

WHAM!!

“WHERE IS HE?!” All three patriarchal figures jumped and spun around, finding a very furious-looking Beelzbub in a black dress stomping across the hall. They stood there in a dumbed silence as they watched Bee storm towards them helplessly, coming to a screeching halt with her eyes burning a thousand raging infernos within them. “Go on, where is he?! Where is that son of a bitch!” Bee snarled viciously, her voice demanding and boasting a stunning ferociousness; “Where, huh?? ***WHERE?!”***

Stolas was the one to squeak; “W-Who—”

Bee scowled even harder; “Ritter, Stolas, clean out your ears! Where the hell is that spunk stain, huh?! That-that scum-sucking.. s-son of a bitch! ***Ragh—*** I’ll fucking kill him! Right here, right motherfucking now!!”

“My presence was requested?” A slick, coldly professionalist voice called out with a deep echo from a dark corner of the room, sending a chill up everyone’s spine. Emerging from that patch of supernatural shadow was Ritter, his form commanding and stiffly upright as he glided across the ancient-patterned floor tiles. His sole working eye stared blankly at Bee as though she was nothing of importance to behold, like she was beneath him in every conceivable sense.

It was this steely, insultingly indifferent look that sent Bee on the verge of a rage, a vein just about ready to burst in her temple. Without hesitation she marched on up to the Sinner and scolded; “I told you to go easy on her.”

“And I said I wouldn’t make such promises,” Ritter asserted, calm and confident with his position in the confrontation.

“It wasn’t a request, you heartless jackbooted asshole,” Bee stabbed back, jamming a sharp finger just inches from his face; “It was a fucking *order!* You’re all about orders, aren’t you, or am I speaking to some psychopathic phony?!” This had no effect on the steely man, the only reaction she managed to get out of him being a mere, almost insulting blink. The Sin of Gluttony growled like a tempered hellhound, then uttered; “Why are we here, Ritter, what is this? And *why* did I have to find out about this from the NEWS, why wasn’t I told??” Out of a loss, she spun around to peer at Stolas, Asmodeus, and Mammon; “Gentlemen?!”

“Because we wholly did expect this illogical reaction from thee.” Ringing out throughout the largely empty room like a chasm’s echo was a wholly unmistakable voice, one that reeked of years of frustration, deceitfulness, and wrath, and slithered like a serpent. And like a serpent another presence emerged from the shadows, his white formal dress cutting through the darkness and into the light like a ghost through brickwork, his eerily flawless giving him a spectral glide. “This was an operation which required such affirmative action, according to circumstances,” Lucifer asserted; “And letting thee knoweth yond hath happened wouldst beest perilous. But anyhow, despite our best efforts, that doesn’t matter. Alas, you’re here despite it all. Such a privilege.”

“DON'T give me that passive aggressive horseshit,” Bee scorned forcefully, all of her teeth bared like she was a rabid animal ready to dig its canines into the devil’s neck; “You know full fucking well that Loona is under my, that is ***MY,*** jurisdiction! I deal with hellhounds, I do! I am their Queen! I say what goes with hellhounds around here, and I have since we fell!”

“And alas, despite thy position, thee choose to act ‘gainst thineself, and thy authority which I bestowed unto you. Doth bid me, Beelzebub, educate me; am I just to assume yond thou art neglecting your appointed duties?”

“I’m not neglecting *SHIT,”* Bee let out in a slow, emphatic drawl, her teeth gnashed together as if they were held in place with a vice.

“Then why are we in the position we are now,” Ritter interjected and answered for Lucifer, the King of Hades seeming to not only let it happen, but outright approved of it as well. He continued, paying a glance to the other Sins idling behind she who ruled over Gluttony, throwing a hand towards them; “If you had acted according to your role, none of us would be here. The threat would’ve been nullified, Herr Asmodeus’ arrangements wouldn’t have been canceled, Herr Stolas wouldn’t be fretting like an infant with a fever, und Herr Mammon wouldn’t be facing the risk of amputation. Don’t you feel any guilt for your neglectful decisions, *"Eure Majestät,"* or lack thereof?”

“Yeah, Bee!” Mammon piped up uninvited; “Why didn’t ya do anything about that little fleabag, huh? Now look at me! Loo-Look at me fucken hand!”

“Sir Mammon, in all due respect to thy unfortunate position, shut the fuck up,” Lucifer quickly barked like a principle scolding a student, then waving a hand to allow Ritter to continue his long-winded critique.

In turn Ritter replied with a soft yet clear-as-day “Vielen Dank” and a nod of his head. He continued, now pacing around Beelzebub like a starving vulture to a rotten carcass; “Collaboration, Failure to Comply, Forgery of Spells; these are a list of crimes which have indeed been put to the Fraulein’s head. As of now, she is unconscious — perhaps concussed and bruised, to put it mildly — but by the time she awakens, a punishment must be decided on, as is proper procedure. You have a chance to set this right, the only chance.”

Despite her deep burning hatred for the Sinner standing before her, Bee had no choice but to listen carefully, taking his sickening words into consideration. With all things considered, Ritter was right; this was her only chance to, as he put it, “set things right.” Loona was underneath her jurisdiction from the moment she was born, as with every other hellhound who existed, exists, and will exist. Hellhounds were her burden of responsibility, but it was a responsibility which she took a certain amount of pride in, and today she would need to utilize that authority; perhaps for her sake.

For the first time since Ritter began, Lucifer spoke up; “Thee wilt make a decision here, Beelzebub. I’m afraid it is imperative, for all of us here.”

Mammon of course had to remark; “Hang her! Gut the little bastard,” he bellowed with a hateful shout. Nobody paid him any mind.

Stolas meanwhile walked calmly up to Bee and placed a hand upon her shoulder, causing her to flinch from the tension she felt. In a voice which was tempered and far different from the slurry of anxiety he had felt minutes ago, the goetia prince said; “We must do something, Bee. You have to give the order.”

Beelzebub felt ill, queasy even, like she was going to throw her stomach up all over the floor then and there, her throat unbelievably dry and lined with the coarsest sands. The Queen of Gluttony and of All Hellhounds felt sick. And so with a deep, shuddering breath, she whimpered; “Can you give me five? I-I’ll make a decision, I promise! All I need is… yeah, ju-just five minutes. Is that fine, or is it too much to ask?”

A dead, stoney stare came Bee’s way from both Lucifer and Ritter, who looked to each other with blank, unreadable eyes for a moment to come to a mutual verdict. It wasn’t too long until one came; “You may,” Lucifer finally granted, turning his eyes back towards the fellow ancient aristocrat; “But let it only be five, lest I cometh to an appropriate verdict myself. Let it be known yond we much favor execution.” This prompted Mammon, who could barely contain his excitement, to silently celebrate, pumping his arms energetically into the air. With the air thick with the putrid scent of tension, this extremely rare show of feigned “mercy” from Lucifer was like a breath of fresh air to the fallen angel, the noose loosened around her neck even for just a few measly minutes. Then came an order from the King of Hades himself; “The following will leave with me; Mammon, Ritter, and Asmodeus. We shall returneth in five minutes.” And so departed the heralded names, following their feeble-bodied monarch back into the shadows.

There in the vast, and in the vast, reverberative room remained only Stolas and Beelzebub; judge and jury. The Sin of Gluttony let out a sharp sigh and staggered uneasily on her feet, threatening to topple over and collapse into a sad mess of yellow, black, and magenta. Stolas rushed to her side and supported both her shoulders, trying to console her. “What am I gonna do, Stolas,” Bee croaked in a voice threatening to burst into tears; “Wh-What do I do..? I-I can’t just kill her, she’s one of mine!”

“I’m of the same opinion,” Stolas soothed, patting the poor Sin’s shoulders; “Don’t worry, I’m on your side in this.”

“H-Hah. That’s a pretty lie, Stolas, real pretty,” Beelzebub shuddered, sliding her hands down her much troubled face, feeling her mascara smear across her fingers. “You were there, weren’t you? Wh-Why didn’t you stop this, why didn’t you do something..? Anything…”

“I’m afraid I couldn’t do tha—”

“But **WHY!!”** Bee cried out painfully, peering at the goetia through misty eyes which threatened to release a cloak of tears. “W-We gotta do something, Stolas, something! Just… we gotta do something without killing her, that’s all I want. For her to be alive. I-I can’t bring myself to-… *for fuck sake, Loona, you idiot...”*

Stolas, who was full of sympathy and knew of the happenings well, stared back into Bee’s eyes and thought long and hard. He attempted to come up with something sufficient to appease every party involved: The moderates; Beelzebub, himself — and the hardliners; Ritter, Lucifer, and the insufferable Mammon. It was going to be a balancing act for the both of them, without a doubt. Then it hit him; the flickers of an idea, a suitable punishment which would have everlasting consequences. With this in mind, Stolas piped up again; “I might have the solution…”

The Decree

08/09/6570 (A.F.)

Published: 12:00 Hours

NOTICE: This is an official classified document of the 'United Realm of Hades' (U.R.H.) containing a decree which is in effect from the following date: **[09/09/6570 at 00:00 Hours].**

The enforced decree is set to expire on: [N/A — Definitive].

BE ADVISED: Due to the confidential nature of this legal article, public viewing of the following information is strictly prohibited. Breach of confidentiality of this document will result in a strict and resolute reprimand, following the protocol of *'Decree no. 1'* under the *'Sabotage Act of 39 (A.F.)'.*

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Decree no. 6970831:

By Order of Decree from the Nine Lords, on authority of His Prime Lordship, Lucifer I of Hades; King of Hades, Duke of Pride, Duke of Greed, Baron of Envy, Prince of Gluttony, Lord of Sloth, Prince of Wrath, Baron of Lust, First Field Marshal of the United Legions, Head Governor of The United Realms General Committee (U.R.G.C.), Headmaster of the Nine Realms Exchequer, High Chancellor of the Overlord's Guild, Grand Warden of all Prisons & Labor Camps, and Founder of the Order of The Black Knights:

By just prerogative and righteous conviction on the advice of Her Lordship, The Queen of Gluttony, and His Highness, Prince Stolas; I, The King of Hades, hereby enforce Exile upon the Hellhound by the name of Loona, on grounds of Treason, Failure to Comply, Collaboration with Enemies of The State, Forgery of Spells, Unjust Conduct, Lying to Civil Authorities, and Unlawful Usage of Spells. As a result, from the **9th of September, 6570 A.F. at approximately 00:00 Hours**, the subject will be banished and thus strictly prohibited from entering this realm of Hades. If the Hellhound, Loona, is seen as failing to comply with this order, she will be swiftly punished which shall result in death. Anyone seen coming into contact with said subject matter after the enactment of this law shall too be punished accordingly, which too shall result in death. This order is definitive and shall be in place for the foreseeable future, if not for eternity. Those who were associated with the subject matter before this sentence have been pardoned, and thus aren't subject to the decree of Exile, nor are the subject of suspicion upon evaluation.

The above decree has been reviewed, approved, and signed by the following parties, thus granting it immediate ascension:

-King of Hades,
-Queen of Gluttony,
-King & Lord of Greed,
-Prince of all-Goetia,

-King of Lust,
-Head of Security & Kommandant of the Shoktrup; Hermann O. Ritter.

"Look there. Do you see the changing wind?"

"I am not sure of what I see. That I am not. But according to what mine own eyes allow me to perceive, it appears it does."

"Look there, how she leaves. How she is. The pack heavy on her sore back, her face emotionless and closed off from the world, but her mind is brimming with severe emotion. Up, and up."

"There is no deception there indeed. Something has indeed changed."

"Indeed so. But the change must be heartfelt, deep within the inner self chasm."

"Time shall tell."

"Indeed it shall. When the time comes, she must see you. It is imperative, I'm sure."

"It shall be so."

Bell Tolls

The elderly and theologically seasoned Father Aleksander walked tirelessly alongside his younger compatriot-in-faith — Father Andrei, who was forty years his junior — making their way out of the stark-white cathedral and out towards the greenery. Save for a handful of chanters still inside after the two-hour service, and with the vast majority of the attendants departed for the late afternoon, both Priests were left alone to their devices until the next divine liturgy the following day, one which the younger Priest of the two would lead. “I’m afraid,” the young Father Andrei said, conversing in Russian; “That the city council is adamant on this. They have told me to tell you that for next year, we must choose a different route which doesn’t use the main road.”

Father Aleksander, in face of this apparent opposition, remained vigilant and firm in his conviction, his hands relaxed and clasped behind his back. He muttered, calmly and full of inner peace in his fatherland’s tongue; “I have dealt with the city council numerous times, Andrei, I am sure that they will come to their senses again. At some point after every Paskha one of them expresses their disapproval of our nightly processions, but I do not pay them much mind. The Paskha processions will continue, as God wills it.”

“You are right to be firm on this Father, of course,” Father Andrei agreed wholeheartedly, still strolling leisurely alongside his elderly counterpart; “But this council seems considerably less tolerant about the processions. That is at least one of the members, the one that contacted me.”

At this the elderly patriarch paused in his step, coming to a realization with his white bushy eyebrows raised upwards; “This man, by chance,” Father Aleksander pondered; “Would his name be something like ‘Damian Loch’?” It seemed by the look in his eyes that he fully expected the following response.

“That is his name, yes,” Father Andrei nodded.

“Ah,” Father Aleksander huffed, an unsurprised smirk appearing from underneath his lengthy beard, and lightly shooed the name away with a hand; “Yes, yes, I know of Damian Loch well. I’m not surprised.”

This indifferent remark caught the young clergyman by mild surprise; “How so,” he asked in turn.

“He’s one of the younger generation of councillors,” the elderly Priest explained in calm earnest; “The man is merely a child, only in his middle thirties, who thinks he has the whole world figured out. I’ve heard his name being spoken in disapproving scolds around this city, both young and old, and because of this the man is disgruntled. I knew of his father, a pleasant man who was in his son’s position, that of the Labor Party. His son is now a member of ‘The Greens,’ as they call themselves, though they’re a deep shade of red.” The advanced-in-age Priest noticed his younger counterpart raise his eyebrows, the information obviously a revelation to him. Father Aleksander then said; “But yes, do reply to him. Say to Mister Loch that the Paskha processions will continue, as is agreed upon by the rest of the council.”

“I will make that known,” Father Andrei duly obliged, now finding himself on the greenery section of the hallowed ground alongside the strolling old man. For a man of his well advanced age and despite his recent surgical knee operation, Father Aleksander was certainly agile, and brimming with confidence in his step. Before he knew it, Father Andrei found himself in front of the cast statue where the senior Father Aleksander now rested aside, his arm propped up on the surface of the plinth and the wind gently ruffled the sleeve of his black cassock. “You certainly beat me in agility, Father,” Father Andrei remarked as a compliment, still speaking in his northern dialect of Russian.

Father Aleksander, in his Southern Russian dialect, replied; “I am thankful that God has allowed me to continue this way, despite my eighty-five years. Indeed, he has blessed me with decent health so far; well, that’s excluding my knee.”

“May he continue to bless you,” the young priest said with much sincerity, proud of the achievement of the man who had mentored him in the Faith for so long. Starting as no more than a student at the youthful age of nineteen, Andrei Ioannovich Belyakov had been taught at a Theological College by one Father Aleksander Chatkin, frequent teacher and veteran Priest who too had gone through the same process. For the betterment of five years, a younger Andrei Belyakov would study to become a Deacon, and went on to study an additional four to become a Priest soon after. Because of this time, the young and optimistic clergyman would grow a theologically paternal bond with the man decades his senior, one that had lasted the test of time and aged like a pristine, velvety, bitter wine. Moving the sparce conversation along, Father Andrei then asked; “So about the new convert we’re receiving, it’s on the Friday we’re baptizing her, yes?”

Shifting on his feet for comfort, Father Aleksander nodded; “The Australian girl? Yes, that’s correct. Her family will be attending too, a large one. As I understand it she’s also invited others, so we must…” Just as he orientated his focus away from his younger counterpart, Father Aleksander’s voice trailed off and his expression grew highly attentive; stunned, surprised, shocked even. He was staring at something behind them.

Father Andrei lowered his brow; “Must what? Father?” It was then that the Priest turned around to meet with whatever the elder was looking so intensely at. Whatever he had expected to see, it

definitely wasn't what he was met with.

Standing just before the two Priests in an unsettlingly rigid stance was, behold, Loona, with an overstuffed backpack and a large unwieldy duffel bag in her tight clutches. The way that she stood there — with her back stiff, her face tight-lipped and intense, the side of her temple bruised and clotted with a black blood-like substance, and her eyes bloodshot — it was like she had been to war, walked right through an open battlefield, and came out of it with all the wounds imaginable. The expression which Loona held on her pale face contained numerous emotions; fury, distraughtness, bitterness, exhaustion. This, in combination with the intense redness in her eyes and her drenched face, painted an awful, awful picture. Upon deeper inspection, both Priests noticed that she was shaking — tensely.

The silence between clergymen and the suddenly appeared young woman was loud, and oppressive. It was only thanks to Father Aleksander's initiative and courage did the silence finally give way. He uttered, full of caution and concern; "Loona?"

Weakly Loona began to mumble, her mouth twitching and barely gaping more than an inch, an obvious futile attempt to form a coherent sentence, resulting only in brittle breathy whimpers. The words were so unbelievably faint on Loona's lips as her worn body continued to jitter, her eyes never blinking despite their all-engulfing redness. *"Y-... you... you did... this is-... y-you... I-I,"* the battered and bruised young woman wheezed incoherently, using each breath to force out a raspy word from her constricted throat. As if by correlation the air around the three-way standoff grew tense, and the wind petered off into stillness, all the while a clearly shaken Loona stood rigidly, staring at both clergymen with vividly distraught yet wrathful eyes. While Father Aleksander was more concerned about Loona's wellbeing, Father Andrei was of the far opposite approach, staring right back at her with intention to restrain if needs be; he didn't trust the wild look burning deep within her face, shooting daggers at him in the same way a rabid animal would.

Being the pacifist he was, perhaps thanks to his aging physique, Father Aleksander continued to speak without confrontation in English; "Loona? Loona, what happened to you? Why are you carrying those—"

"Woah-woah, Father," the highly defensive Father Andrei interrupted in a harsh whisper through the means of Russian, gesturing cautiously to the gash on Loona's temple; "Her head, Father, it's her head. She's concussed. What's that black smear there, what is that?" There came no reply to the young Priest's observance, except the sound of Loona's short, sharp breaths. Sending the repugnant scent of danger before him, Father Andrei said clearly to the intruder, also in English; "Don't try anything funny here, young lady, we don't want any trouble here."

In the most unsettling way possible, a crooked grin slithered across Loona's tear-ridden face, and hissed out a low, throaty titter; "…Tsh… You don't want… a-any trouble.. h-huh?" The disturbed young woman let out another shuddering breath, then the heavy duffel bag slipped out of her grip and landed bluntly on the turf with a dull thud. "I'm in a world of complete a-and utter shit, and you don't want any trouble..? H-Hah… Tha-That's really kind of you, *Father Andrei,* really fucking kind. So pious." With a shuddering breath Loona diverted her eyes back towards Father Aleksander, her grin turning into a shaky, hate-brimming scowl; "You did this. … Yo-You did this to me," Loona croaked out, her voice breaking as she threatened to break down crying.

She let out a snot-drenched sniffle and groaned further; "You and your… hospitality, an-and openness and all that "love thy neighbor" horseshit! You did this to me. *H-Hic! Snrrf-* Why didn't you turn me away..?" Loona's overstuffed backpack slid off her shoulders as she began to stagger forwards, her shoes scraping heavily against the ground and she began to reach out, her fingers arching into claws with intent to gouge. "I hate you… I hate every *single* fucking last one of you… Y-You're all… *hic!* You're all sc… scum of the…" Just like that, without a second's worth of warning, Loona fainted, collapsing face-first into the ground.

At first there was much hesitation to approach the incapacitated woman, at least on Father Andrei's part. The initiative was again taken by Father Aleksander who came forward to Loona's aid, prepared to bend himself down and check if she was alright. He was barely a foot away from her when signs of life began seeping out of the pale woman once more, her arms weakly hoisting her upper body from the ground and her head craning upwards to meet the Priest's eyes again. Somehow she looked even more anguished and furious than she did before, this time with a few fresh mascara-streaked teardrops and her hair in a tangled mess. Suddenly a shaky hand shot out and grabbed desperately onto Father Aleksander's cassock!

Loona used this gripping point to try and hoist herself up further with little avail, all the while she gasped out, her voice giving way to hissing anger; "You did this to me! Yo-You son of a bitch, this is your fault! Thi-This is… *nngurh*... T-This is…" Then finally, with one last breath-bated curse, Loona again vanished into unconsciousness.

"She's insane," Father Andrei remarked with morbid awe from behind the spectacle, perhaps out of lack of better judgment. Out of all the times he had ever seen this ill-fitting stranger, all he had ever seen her do was act abnormally, and thus brought suspicion upon herself; today was no exception.

But Father Aleksander ignored this, instead throwing his head back towards the grand church and calling out; "Tikhon! Evgeniy! Come out here, quickly!"

Little more than an hour had passed that morning and already a portion of the Event Hall had been converted into a makeshift hospice, a bed having been set up in the entrance chamber leading into the building proper. Just over half of the eight members of the clergy that day had been given permission to go home, and so there were three: ‘Evgeniy’, Father Andrei, and of course Father Aleksander. The small steel-framed bed which Loona now lay seldom conscious in was draped in a white mattress cover and a shabby but adequate woolen blanket. Thanks to this means of rest, as well as some coaxing into drinking water which was met with snarls and weak fury, her earlier shivering had since petered off into short periodic twitches.

Father Aleksander shuffled back to where the ailed woman was held up, gently pushing the door open and closing it behind himself, finding the young ‘Evgeniy’ — a medical student — still keeping guard by the side of Loona’s bed. “So how’s she doing,” the aging clergyman inquired in a whisper, conversing again in Russian.

“Low-grade fever, Father, a few bruises along her body,” ‘Evgeniy’ listed quietly, still watching over the barely aware stranger; “And she’s definitely been concussed recently. Something’s happened to her.”

“I can see that,” the Priest acknowledged regretfully, briefly taking off his skufia and holding it by his side; “But what?”

“From what it looks like, she’s been beaten,” the newly-minted nurse observed, then gestured towards Loona’s wounds; “One across the head, but the other bruises look a little less deliberate. Still done by a person though, without a doubt. Looks like she’s been handled roughly to me.”

“Animals,” Father Aleksander cursed, looking down at the depressing display lying weak and dormant; “Have you managed to call the ambulance yet?”

Then came the frustrating part, one that baffled both men of faith; “I’ve tried,” Evgeniy stressed; “But according to them for some daft reason she’s low priority, they’ll get to us in an hour.”

“Never mind that then,” the Priest huffed in justified frustration; “We don’t have an hour. Is she at least stable?”

“Yes, for the meantime. Pretty sure she’ll pull through, she’s not critical so far. Fever’s stable, wound on her head is clotted, but I don’t know what that black stuff is. It might be dried blood, but I’ve never seen it as dark as that before. I’ll keep watch on her.”

Suddenly a soft, polite thricefold knock came from the door, before then slowly creeping open to reveal Father Andrei standing on the other side. He stood there almost sheepishly with each hand on both double doors, and cleared his throat; “Ahem- Ah- Sorry to interrupt, Father, but can I speak to you?”

“In a second, Andrei, I’ll be right out,” Father Aleksander assured, turning back toward Evgeniy to give him a pat on his arm. “Look after her,” the elderly clergyman said, then donned his skufia again before heading back outside. There he found Father Andrei standing there a few feet away, waiting and rubbing his hands together from Toowoomba’s afternoon September chill. “What’s the matter,” Father Aleksander asked, still speaking in Cyrillic tongue.

“Excuse me for saying so, Father,” the man of emerging reservations pleaded, too speaking in the same language; “But there’s something about her.”

Father Aleksander furrowed his bushy, wrinkled brow; “In what way?”

“I’m not sure yet,” the young Priest replied, shaking his head and staring towards the entrance; “But there’s something about her I don’t exactly trust. Again, I’m not sure what, but I suggest we keep an eye on her.”

“I’m not sure if I’m following,” the senior stated, slightly confused; “Is this about her health, or how she’s acting? If you mean her erratic behavior, then—”

“Yes, that’s exactly my problem,” Father Andrei gently interrupted, his voice ringing a faint yet clear sense of urgency; “You saw her an hour ago, the way she was acting. If she hadn’t fainted, I’m sure she would’ve gouged both of our eyes out! Just the way she was clawing at you like… l-like an animal! It was-… I don’t know, it was very daunting. Yes it might be judgmental for me to say this, and may God forgive me, but I’m not sure if I trust her intentions here.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine, Andrei, let her come to. She’s erratic and confused at the moment, that’s all.”

“Exactly. But what happens when she wakes up, and then wha– what if she’s still like that, what then? Come on, Father, you must be of the same opinion, surely!”

At first there was a brief look of indecision in Aleksander's eyes, almost reluctant to say anything on the matter as he went deathly quiet, perhaps not wanting to take a side which would compromise his role as a Priest. Eventually however he began to nod, then conceded; "I am somewhat, Andrei, believe me. But I must say to you, we cannot rush to unjust conclusions. We're not here to do that. Something bad has happened to her, I'm sure we can both tell."

"And I don't doubt that, that's evident," the weary Father Andrei assured, taking a quick acknowledging glance back towards the Event Hall's entrance chamber; "But surely we shouldn't have to be subject to her wrath. If she has problems with either us or someone else, harming us won't do her any good."

"Then we must keep her in our prayers," Father Aleksander asserted in his words of theological knowledge; "Then she will get through this, whatever that may be." Pivoting himself around the old Priest paid a long glance back towards the Event Hall, his thoughts without a doubt with the heavily incapacitated inpatient. The late orange afternoon hue was growing ever dimmer to the west as the sun vanished, giving way to the evening purple and black sky, a star or two rearing its head in the heavens to greet the Earth, all the while a very confusing situation continued to play on. The sound of an engine approaching from the distance caught the attention of both clergymen, both of them finding out in unison that a vehicle — a silver pickup — had just pulled up into the carpark and shut off without even an attempt to park. "He's here," Father Aleksander muttered to his theological compatriot, watching as a tall silhouette stepped out of the vehicle and marched with urgent gusto towards them.

In no time at all the figure reached them, the figure in question being one James Steele, with a serious look in his eyes. "You're lucky I was in the area," he wheezed almost breathlessly; "What's going on, wha-what is this? What's Loona doing here, is she okay?" There was a clear nervous sweat on his brow as his gaze flitted around between the clergymen and the building behind them — he looked worried sick.

"She's in a bit of a state, Mister Steele," Father Aleksander explained with no delay, replicating the seriousness; "She's stable though, we reckon she'll pull through. We tried calling for an ambulance, but they said she's low priority."

Indignation came the revelation's way; "Of course they did, arseholes," Jim growled; "Can I see her, where is she?"

No time was wasted on Father Aleksander's side as he began ushering; "Over here," he said and began leading, his step just as sure as it had ever been, if not more. Father Andrei meanwhile bit his

lip from speaking any further about his Loona-centered reservations, though an uneasy look reigned in the demeanor of his eyes. Jim seemed to passively notice it, however he wasn't much aware of the context.

Just as the entourage made it up to the entrance doors, they flung open from the other side, revealing a wide-eyed Evgeniy; "She's awake," he announced with a hint of excitement; "She's lucid, barely, but she's awake."

"Is she temperate," Father Andrei asked cautiously, the question met with a glance from his older counterpart.

"Seems so," Evgeniy was quick to inform, nodding his head rigidly as he glanced back towards the bed for a second; "Give her some time to come to though, she might not respond to questions. She didn't with mine." It was with this cautionary advice that the guard at the door let all three men through, with Jim being particularly enthused to find out about Loona's condition for himself. Lo and behold there was Loona, now sitting upright in the small bed with a glassy look on her face, the only sign of her being alive and aware and not some stiff cadaver being her chest faintly rising and falling in deep, slow breaths. While the black substance on the side of her head had been cleaned up, the bruises from whatever object had struck her sat there as a reminder of the beating she had evidently received.

Jim looked on with sorrowful disbelief; "Jesus Christ…" he muttered in a growl underneath his breath, holding his face from the cheekbone down with his hand, the other placed squarely on his hip. "So she just wandered up to ya's like this," the most recent visitor asked, turning back towards Father Aleksander who nodded in eerie solemn silence. This pained Jim who visibly winced and shook his head; "Shit." He turned back towards the ailed Loona, then on his own initiative and judgment crept slowly towards her. He stood there quietly when he loomed over the bed, unsure what to do with his hands before setting them aside, then tried to coax Loona out of her daze; "Loona? … Loona."

"...Mm..." Was the meager, barely audible response that Loona gave the familiar face, her glassy eyes still fixated on an unspecified spot on the wall.

"You okay?"

"...Mm..."

“What happened to you? … What’s with the bags?”

There came no reply, in its place her expression tensed up for a moment, then relaxed like nothing happened. Jim ran a hand down his face and again groaned out a soft curse from underneath his breath, then turned back to the Priests and asked; “Hey look, I-I’ll take her from your hands, she’ll be okay with me.” He returned his focus back to the disoriented and barely lucid woman; “You okay to walk?”

Everyone fell into silence as they anticipated Loona’s response, though for the first few seconds she remained concerningly stagnant; not a sound nor move came from her, not even a flinch. But before all hope was lost of a reply, Loona weakly nodded then with trembling arms began to heave herself up from the bed, weakly moving her legs from the mattress before planting her shoeless feet into her sneakers. After tying them with uncoordinated effort, she finally hoisted herself up from the bed, the same despondent and far-away look still embedded in her exhausted, weary eyes. Jim stood beside Loona at eye level, and heard the delicate whisper which she let out, so faint that only he could hear it; “I’m cold.”

The walk back to the car was laborious and slow, like a death march which was only missing the dull chime of a funeral bell. The woolen blanket hung like a ragged robe over Loona’s shoulders as she shuffled towards the car, never making eye contact the entire way there. Father Andrei and Evgeniy meanwhile followed with Loona’s overfilled luggage in tow, not once making another comment on the gaunt and bruised woman’s condition. Time seemed to have no flow, blending in with itself as Jim finally left the hallowed grounds with Loona pitifully curled up on the passenger’s side, her bags threatening to burst open right at her feet forcing her to curl herself into a ball. The drive was eerily silent and devoid of emotion, though brimming with a depressing tension which threatened to snap at any moment. Sadly that snapping point came when, with the pickup speeding down the highway for the drive ‘home’, Loona began to speak up, her pitiful whimpered voice splintering with emotion and she shivered; *“I’m so cold… I-I’m so cold…”*

Jim’s heart sank as he heard his passenger devolving into an emotional wreck; “Loona?”

“Help me…” Loona began to cry, shutting her eyes so tightly that her eyelids began to ache.

“What makes you so special?” — Without warning there came a harsh raspy voice, a voice from the past that was wholly unimpressed with the weeping hellhound’s emotions.

When Loona opened her eyes sore from crying and exhaustion, she no longer found herself in the passenger’s seat of Jim’s pickup. Instead she found herself curled up on a bed in a cell, a cell that

was all too familiar to the hellhound who downright resented the memory. Though her eyes were covered in a mist of tears, Loona could tell just from blurry vision alone that she was back at the adoption center, wearing the tattered clothes she had arrived with. This was a particularly vivid memory, so much so that she could smell the repugnant musky odor which emanated from somewhere outside her cell — that voice, too, she remembered it as clear as day.

The voice, in all of its uninviting splendor, wheezed once more from outside, across the corridor; “What makes you so special ova’ there, hm? All cryin’, an’ mopey, an’ the rest of it. Cryin’s not gonna get you anywhere ‘round these parts, girl. ‘S best ya stow it.”

Loona found herself sobbing even more, sniffling away before getting up from her bed and shuffling towards the bars. She looked across the corridor and croaked out to the spectator, shaking the bears with all the strength she could muster; “I wanna leave. I-I wanna leave, right now! I don’t belong here!!”

The distraught teenage hellhound’s plea was met only with a low half-cackle, and from within the cell she was looking at, emerging from the shadows, was a partly blind, large and bulky bulldog hellhound. A great multitude of scars ran across its fur like a collage of pink-tinted ribbons of all different shapes and sizes, and of different stages of healing. One particular scar had cut so deep atop its head that it left a permanent indentation, giving the battle-scarred hellhound neighbor a very lopsided look. This frightening specimen of a being looked more beast than hellhound, if that was even possible, like a mammal of ancient folklore which had slaughtered countless bygone settlements. The fierce-looking bulldog unsheathed its teeth and snarled, absent of sympathy; “Oh quit your whinin’, it’s no damn use! You’re here for the long run, so get used to it. They’ll sniff your fear, and they’ll get ya; mark my goddamn words.” But Loona continued to sniffle and sob despite the bulldog’s warning. The bulldog rolled its bloodshot eyes and growled; *"Rrrgh, give me a break*... I’m only tryna give ya advice, dumbass! Yanno, uh, lil’ tips on how to survive ‘round these parts. Just wanna quit seein’ you runts die so quickly in ‘ere. The scent of all the death, the blood? Eugh- it ticks me the hell off.”

The young and ragged Loona shook her head vigorously; “No! Nonono, please!! I don’t wanna die,” she pleaded desperately, her voice collapsing back into terrible sobs.

Again the bulldog sneered at its neighbor’s intense emotions, its roll-plenty nose scrunching further; “Then listen to my advice, ‘Kay?” Just then it snorted something fierce from the back of its throat before spitting at the ground beside it, a sickening puss-like substance splattering at its feet. It made the distraught Loona sick and lightheaded, seeing it glint in the light just outside in the corridor. The scarred beast continued; “It’s a hound-eat-hound world in ‘ere, girl, an’ ya ragged-clothed ass best get used to it. There ain’t no room for niceties an’ all that hunky-dory horseshit, they don’t care about ya. It’s a special kind of hell in ‘ere, lemme tell ya. We’re all sufferin’ ‘ere. You're nothin’ special. You’re gonna need to act selfish ‘ere, remember that. Only then will you survive. Now? I reckon ya should go to sleep. You can sleep.”

"You can sleep, Loona, you're with me," Jim's voice suddenly echoed softly, seemingly coming from nowhere.

Just like that Loona snapped back to reality, popping from one state of awareness to the next, and now found herself back in the passenger's seat curled into a blanketed ball. This was reality, the here and now; the pound was far behind her, and before her instead of a damp, depressing pound corridor was now a barren road underneath a beautiful veil of stars. Despite everything, Loona was still herself; a bruised, battered, and emotional wreck version of herself, but herself nonetheless. She found an inkling of solace in that fact alone.

In a softened sort of way, Jim spoke up again; "You can sleep, Loona. It's alright. I'll wake you up when we're home."

At first the words didn't quite register, but then it hit her; she had been crying for a whole twenty minutes, at least judging by the time she could read on the dashboard's small analogue clock. "… Mm… I'm cold…" Loona whimpered mindlessly again in the most pitiful way possible, having no strength to pick up her tough veneer at this hour. More tears rolled down her pale-skinned cheeks, stained with long streaks of mascara.

"I know," Jim muttered, then swallowed what sounded like a lump in his throat and his voice buckled; "Muh-Maybe sleep'll fix it, pretty sure it will. Ye-Yeah, it will, I promise."

At this Loona mumbled something incoherently before shifting herself in her seat, hugging herself with the blanket as her heavy eyelids finally gave way. At last, in its infinite fulfilling mercy, came sleep.

Time stood still at IMP headquarters — literally.

A desperate scene stood completely still in the office like a picture, all four imps within the room wearing different expressions and poses like statues in a museum. Moxxie was aiming down his sights with a horrified expression, Millie was about to leap with a knife in her clutches, Sallie May looked ready to pounce, and Blitz was left on the floor with a look of terror on his face. It had been four hours since the confrontation, and since then all four imps frozen in time were left completely still — that was until now.

"…NGAH!! GUH-HAAGH!!" Suddenly Blitz came back to life in a frenzy, before devolving into a mess of spluttered coughing like he hadn't breathed a day in his life, as did Millie, Moxxie, and at last Sallie May, all four of them returning to life completely winded and disoriented. Blitz with a look of crazed rage in his eyes, he whirled his head around the room to find the intruders, only to find nobody: *"H-Huff! Huff, huff*... Stolas? Stolas?! *Where the f-* … LOONA?!" Ignoring the pain which shot from his newly-acquired bullet wound, Blitz frantically searched the room for any signs that Loona was still there. "Loona!! Loona sweetheart, where are you?! Fuckfuckfuck, nonono this can't be real, this isn't fucking— Loona! *LOONA!!"*

Blitz sprinted and threw himself against the door leading out to the hallway, digging his claws into the cheap wood with so much force his nails hurt. In a fit of madness he began pounding against the door, tears beginning to pour out of his eyes and he screamed; "Loona! Loona!! Give me back my daughter, you heartless bastards!"

BANG — BANG — BANG — BANG!!!

"Do you hear me Stolas, you rich scumbag?! I'll fucking gut you! I want my daughter!"

BANG — BANG — BANG — BANG — BANG — BANG!!!

"I WANT MY DAUGHTER, YOU SICK BASTARDS!!"

Unbecoming

“LOONA!! HANG IN THERE LOONA, I’LL SAVE YOU!! I-I DID IT ONCE BEFORE, I CAN DO IT AGAIN!!” Blitz continued to hammer down with clenched fists against the door, mindless thrashing it through the sheer insanity he fell victim to. He didn’t care if his voice was becoming raspy, he didn’t care if he was causing the door to splinter, he didn’t care if he was making so much noise, and he certainly didn’t care that his fists were now covered in his own blood. All that mattered was Loona; his daughter, the only thing keeping him alive, the only person in hell which made his life worthwhile. His rage-brimming eyes were now bloodshot and aching from the torrent of tears running down his face, leaving his red and white-blotched skin with a thin gleaming veneer underneath the overhead lights.

Anyone who bore witness to Blitz in that moment could swear that he would continue to hammer at the door for eternity, even if his now bleeding hands withered away. This would be so, if not for Sallie May’s firm grip who pulled her new boss away from the door, restraining him with all the strength her Wrath-weathered body could summon, especially arresting his hands as they trickled tar-black blood across the floor. Sallie May, in a serious voice, tried slapping sense into the hysterical imp; “Dude, stop! Dangit she’s not out there! She’s gone!”

“No! Nonono, you’re wrong you Wrath bastard, she’s not gone! She’s right out there!” Blitz’s endless hysterics suddenly caused him to laugh, loud and with boisterous mania; “I heard her! I-I-I heard her, just now! J-Just listen, shut the fuck up, you’ll hear her- LOONA!! CRY OUT AGAIN SWEETHEART, I CAN HEAR YOU!!”

“STOP! Blitz, she’s gone!” Sallie May spun Blitz around and stared deeply into his eyes, still trying to bring him back to the reality he needed to face; “You didn’t hear her, she’s gone! They took her!”

The sheer insane look that Blitz gave Sallie May then and there was as if she had just spoken to him in complete gibberish, not making even a miniscule amount of sense to him. How could Loona be gone? She was just there, right there in front of him! One second she was on the floor unconscious, and the next she was… gone. Loona was gone. It hit the single father-of-one just like that; his daughter was gone, like a feeble, fickle wind, almost as though she hadn’t been there at all; picked up by the wind and vanishing without a trace. And that was it; she was gone. With despair weighing down on his mind, Blitz, after taking a shuddering breath and swallowing the lump in his throat, croaked out; “W-Why didn’t you… Why didn’t you stop them? Wh-Why didn’t ANY of you, you assholes?!”

“Because we couldn’t-!” Millie suddenly choked out as a breathless reply, still trying to catch both her breath and her balance; “We were all— *Achk!* —l-literally frozen! We tried Blitz, we really

did!" As she exclaimed this, Millie checked over Moxxie who seemed to be the most winded of them all, too weak to even stand properly.

Though Blitz was about to bark off again in his grief, he stopped himself in a moment of much needed clarity; they *were* frozen, all of them were. One minute they were set to battle against both goetia and sinner, and the next with a burst of goetia trickery, all four imps were left as statues of flesh, bone, and static brawn. It was hopeless from the get-go; there was no way to avoid the inevitable kidnapping. Blitz's lip quivered and his eyes watered; "What the fuck… What the FUCK!! What is this?! Stolas was here, th-then that goose-stepping motherfucker, then they… they took her from me. We need to find her… W-WE NEED TO—"

Ping!

Stopping Blitz dead in his tracks was his phone pinging off in his coat pocket, vibrating faintly against his body. It felt daunting to hear the high-pitched ping of a notification, most likely heralding the arrival of a text message or something of that nature. In truth Blitz dreaded to even check what it was, a dread which in the end was justified when he hesitantly fished the phone out of his pocket. Sure enough it was a message, a short sort of message from Stolas no less, and one which made his heart sink into the deepest inner recesses of his stomach: ***"I'm sorry, dearest Blitz. It needed to be done,"*** the message read simply, and with the message was an attachment. The attachment was a document from the ***'Office of The Prince of All-Goetia'***, addressing Blitz personally on the matter of his daughter, the word 'exile' printed in bold and blunt letters in that jungle of overcompensating words.

Then and there, without even a minute hint of exaggeration, Blitz's life flashed before his eyes. The past five years of his life had just been snuffed out, well and truly vanished into the past; every free waking hour with his daughter for the past five years of fatherhood was now nothing more than a memory. Just like that the air in Blitz's lungs had been stolen, his eyes glaring intensely at the screen which began to mist up again. It hurt him. It angered him. It made him wish to kill. But there was only one thing Blitz could do in that moment; he weeped silently, choking on every shallow breath he took. The weight of grief on the grieving imp's shoulders became too much and he staggered backwards, his back slamming into the wall which he slid down onto his rear-end, then curled himself up into a ball.

Seeing her newly-minted boss become so distraught ignited a pang of sympathy within Sallie May, who approached him cautiously as he breathed deeply. "Hey," she quietly said as she reached her hand out, only for her touch to be outright rejected when Blitz lurched back away from it — he was inconsolable. Sallie May tried speaking further, softly assuring; "W-We'll sort this out, man, together. This isn't the end, I can promise you that much. We'll find your daughter."

“That’s a pretty promise, Sal’. Real fucking pretty,” was the meagre croak that came as a response, the male imp’s voice muffled by his folded arms. He arrested the dew of tears from his eyes and raised his head, staring right at the imp from Wrath. “They exiled her,” he choked in utter hopelessness.

“What??”

Blitz let out a dry, utterly hopeless laugh, a crooked grin carving its way across his face in the same way a crack appears in pottery. “Hah, yeah. Tha-That was pretty much my reaction, too,” the imp wheezed; “Just picked her up, and… sent her on her way. Like she’s nothing.”

“They… They did what-,” another bated voice piped up after regaining control of his lungs, the voice belonging to none other than Moxxie who was still supported vertically by his wife. “Exile,” Moxxie repeated to himself, almost taken aback by the word, let alone the possibility; “I-I didn’t even know that was possible…”

“Yeah, well, apparently it is,” Blitz slurred through muffled words behind his sleeve; “And it had to happen to… *to my daughter*. … God-FUCKING-DAMMIT!!” Blitz’s anger exploded and he punched a hole right into the wall adjacent, ignoring the sharp pain from his earlier frantic pounds on the door. “Why ME,” Blitz cried out, his voice shattering all remnants of silence; “Why the fuck me, why the fuck my daughter, my baby?! It’s like the universe loves to chew me up then spit me the fuck out! It’s like… l-like it WANTS me to die! Jokes on you, universe, I’m already dead inside — you’re playing with a corpse!!”

“Blitz, wait!” Millie with regained clarity in her breathing shouted suddenly, trying to help the perilous situation; “That message said she’s in exile, right? M-Maybe we can figure out where they sent her!”

But Blitz vigorously shook his head. “We can’t do that, Mills,” he exclaimed hopelessly; “They’ve got eyes on all of us! Apparently we’re in a probation period.”

Sallie May upturned her nose and scowled; “A probation p— what the fuck does that mean, what did *we* do??”

“Fuck if I know! Ask that rich royal asshole!” Blitz’s vocal cords strained to do their job in vocalizing the words, on account of him screaming his lungs out only a minute or two prior, the lingering breathlessness from earlier too contributing to the struggle. After this nobody knew of

what else to say, the whole Deja vu-esque situation both confusing and tragic at the same time. For most in the room it felt like a repeat of the events of nigh on two months ago, this time with far greater obstacles than ever anticipated. If there was any solace to be found, it was in the shared suffering of having lost a member of the work family; a debatable shining star who was crucial to the inner workings of IMP. Without her, things would never be the same, especially in Blitz's bewildered and grieving point of view. In his eyes, the company he owned and the troubled life he led, had been nothing but shattered.

Now of course Millie had her own mind on what had happened; confused, bewildered, worried about Blitz's destroyed mental wellbeing, and also thinking about Loona's whereabouts. It reminded her of the run-in her husband had with those living world agents, which thankfully ended in Moxxie being found safe and sound. She knew how distraught she felt about the possibility of Moxxie being dead, and it pained her to imagine exactly what Blitz was feeling here and now; anxious, distraught, angry, despondent… depressed. In fact, no, Millie didn't need to imagine what Blitz was feeling; she *knew* he was emotionally wrecked, it was obvious from the state of him. With Blitz still in an emotionally agonized wreck with her sister to keep him company, Millie turned back to look at Moxxie, who was standing there with an unreadable look on his face. He looked dazed. This was cause for Millie to react, leaving Sallie May to console Blitz and heading back towards her husband. The Wrath imp carefully called out his name; "Moxxie?"

Moxxie blinked at his name and looked back up to his wife. He narrowed his eyes and whispered harshly; "Exile? W-What the hell did she do for that?"

"I-I dunno," Millie shrugged her shoulders, as much at a loss as everyone else with an unsettled look on her features; "I didn't even know they could do that."

This comment was met with mild apathy from Moxxie, who hummed in a short tone before remarking; "Mm. No doubt this is a result of her many antics. Wouldn't be surprised." Soon as he said this, Moxxie noticed the disapproving look in Millie's usually gentle eyes, glaring at him like he had just said the most offensive thing in all of hell. "What," the Greed imp asked, rather clueless.

Millie, to say the least, didn't play along. "Baby, c'mon. You know exactly what," she flatly replied and almost scolding, sounding more disappointed than angry. "I know you're not necessarily on good terms with Loona, and I understand why. But c'mon, look at Blitz! At least try to help us figure this out."

Moxxie's reaction to this was less than desirable, the imp paying it no mind. "Well excuse me for not being entirely onboard with caring about someone who's *bullied* me for who knows how long now." This was the position the usually mild-mannered Moxxie held firm to, an opinion which he

had held on to for a good few months now, brewing silently bigger and bigger until it could come to a head; the head, it seemed, was near.

“I know, sweetie, but she’s one of us. She’s ours! W-We can’t just let those pieces of shit get away with this, not without a fight!”

“Pfuh! “One of us.” That’s hilarious, Millie,” Moxxie replied callously with a roll of his eyes, catching his beloved wife by surprise; “If she was one of us, she wouldn’t be gallivanting around and getting us all into trouble. Now look at us! We got the *literal* powers that be’s eyes on us now, all thanks to that self-righteous bully-bitch!” A sort of crooked cathartic grin cracked across Moxxie’s lips, and Millie stared at it with a dreadful bewilderment. This wasn’t like anything she had seen or heard from Moxxie before; this wasn’t the man she married. In that horrific nightmarish second, Millie realized that he looked and acted exactly like his father. It scared her. Despite his wife’s visual discomfort, Moxxie continued, his voice steadily rising just above his previous harsh whisperings; “You know what? I couldn’t care less if she got exiled. I’m willing to bet that she probably deserves it!”

“For Wrath’s boiling pits, Moxxie, shut the actual fuck up over there!” Sallie May suddenly blurted out from across the room, still by a shell-shocked Blitz’s side with his bloodshot eyes gazing out into space.

“Or what, Jackass?!” Moxxie snapped back with an audible growl in his throat; “What are you gonna do, huh! You gonna set your hellhogs on me from that shit shack you call your home? Give me a mother-FUCKING break! In fact, no, I’ve had it with you, as much as I’ve had it with Loona! All you’ve ever done since I married Millie is bicker about me at EVERY opportunity; in my face, behind my back, when I’m about to be mauled to pieces by your incest-conceived hogs! You know what, no, I’m not doing this anymore, I can’t! This is where I’m putting my foot down, *Sallie May,* right here, right now!!”

Hell before had not known a more violently oppressive and horrible silence, then what fell within the main room of IMP headquarters. Though nobody dared say it, whether out of choice or an inability to form words, the energy within the IMP ‘family’ had changed dramatically, then and there, metamorphosed into something hostilely unrecognizable. Millie felt it, Sallie May did too, Moxxie embraced it, and Blitz… he had reawaken. Yes, the CEO had regained sentience and his blank, glassy, tear-stained eyes were now staring emotionlessly at his white-haired employee. Renewed energy coaxed Blitz into slowly staggering up onto his feet despite Sallie May’s insistence that he stayed seated, using the wall as his crutch. With regained footing he stepped slowly towards Moxxie, his step laborious and lethargic as the distance closed steadily.

Blitz came to a stop when he was no more than a foot away, staring deeply into Moxxie's eyes and stood there, devoid of emotion or movement. The standoff was intense as both imps glared into the other's eyes, neither of them showing any signs of standing down. Eventually there came a noise; a crooked, broken-sounding snicker from Blitz's equally as crooked lips, which began to curl upwards into a broken spine-chilling grin. "Is… is that what you believe, Moxxie," the imp asked, slow and deliberate with his wording; "Is that… *really,* what you believe..?"

"Earnestly, Sir," Moxxie sneered right back, his eyes steely and uncompromisingly firm, just like his conviction towards Loona and her sentence.

Then came the most blood-curdling sound of all; a low, throaty chuckle, seeping through Blitz's crooked sharp teeth, hissing and whistling away. The imp snapped his head around towards an imaginary audience and he gestured widely to Moxxie; "Look at this," he said with a wheeze; "Haha— Look at this, everyone! Just feast your greedy eyes at how brave, and courageous, and ironclad this scum-sucking son of a whore is!" Blitz whirled himself back around to glare back into Moxxie's eyes, and mocked; "Now aren't you something, you limp-dicked sack of shit. Well guess what, Moxxie; two worthless, unlovable bastards can play at that game. You wanna be brave? Here's one for ya — You're FIRED."

Millie exploded at this; "WHAT?!"

Blitz shot his finger out towards his ex-employee's wife, snarling with a very sharp scowl; "Don't make me fire you, too, 'cause I won't FUCKING hesitate!"

Moxxie too was just as shocked, despite his earlier bravery which had vanished like a brittle plywood veneer; "Wh—y-you— You can't just fire me, Sir!"

"Yeah?! Well I did, ASSHOLE," Blitz exploded like gunpowder; "Now you best get packing, because if you're still here in the next five minutes, I'll be blowing a new fuckhole right through your pathetic little skull!" Everyone in the room who stood witness to Blitz's wrath knew he was serious, full of a genuine anger which could not be contained; Hell hath no wrath like a father inconsolably grieved.

"You know what, Sir? You wanna know the fuck what," Moxxie hit back with sudden renewed courage, inching himself right into Blitz's equally as contorted face; "All you've ever done is make me the butt-end of your idea of jokes! You invade my personal space, you get WAY too close with my wife — that is MY wife — and you just love, just LOVE, to talk shit about my DICK whenever

you get the opportunity! Ha— And you know what I say to you, Blitz Buckzo, considering all that? I say fuck you. FUCK YOU!!"

"Yeahh, that's right, I'm sure you want to," Blitz snarled back like a rabid dog, shoving his shorter counterpart with both hands; "I'm sure you want to fuck me just like the universe just did, and every single little self-righteous asshat that exists in this shithole!"

In the middle of his rage Moxxie stumbled and choked over his words, eventually giving up with a snarling roar before whirling around to pack his things; weapons, ammunition, paperwork, and all. In a huff he stopped into the armory and began gathering the handful he had in terms of weapons, the clatter of weapons taken out of their bays filling the air.

"Blitz, c'mon, please," Millie began to beg, trying to knock sense into a nonsensical turn of events; "Don't go fire him like that, he-he's just tired!"

"We're all tired around here, Millie, for one reason or another," Blitz coldly rejected the plea; "Doesn't give that prick husband of yours any fucking right to start shit, making light of my goddamn daughter!"

"But he's— W-We can work this—"

"Sis." Coming to Millie's immediate aid was Sallie May, the only voice thus far which hadn't spoken for either side, her firm yet comforting red hand placed upon her blood sister's shoulder. She shook her head and said softly, yet regretfully; "They made their decision."

Millie's eyes began to water in a nauseating mixture of sadness, anger, and confusion. All the time that the band-of-three had spent together, for all that was worth, washed away in an explosive tidal wave of anger and malice like it was nothing; a paper house against a grass fire, with not a chance in hell on its side. For as much as Millie wished there was a peaceful way out of this, she knew that her sister was right; their minds were firmly made up, and there was virtually no way she could change that.

Blitz stood there in a brooding, brewing silence as he glared disdainfully towards the armory, almost looking like he was plotting something against his now ex-employee. If he was, he didn't follow through with it, instead announcing in a low, slurring growl; "I'll be in my office. None of you bother me, or there'll be two more redundancies."

And so like a moving monument to depression and despair, Blitz staggered his way into his office, shutting the door behind him with no energy to slam it as he intended. Then came the stillness, the pitch quiet which embraced Blitz with open arms, engulfing him in that dark office with only the light of Hell outside peering through the gaps in the Venetian blinds. A second overwhelming realization of what had happened suddenly came over the imp, who gritted his teeth and clenched his fists, threatening to blow a hole through the worn plaster of his office walls. The only thing that stopped him from doing so was the stinging pain he got from his bruised knuckles, his blood still staining them in half-dried streaks and patches. *"Fuck,"* Blitz whispered to himself, his voice beginning to crack again; *"Fuck…"*

After stifling his tears and mustering whatever energy he had left, the exhausted and distraught imp fumbled his way behind his desk and slumped himself limply into his chair, not even having the energy to lift himself in an upright posture. Blitz's life as he knew it was over, he could feel it. Just as he felt like he might've been going somewhere, making something of a life and a living for himself, the universe and fate collectively and mercilessly spat in his face; knowing the universe and fate well, Blitz reckoned he could hear them laughing at him, delighting in his misery. That's all that people ever did to him; they laughed at him. He was the world's clown, and his miserable existence which was filled with chasing pipe dreams and stumbling through hoops was the eternal circus, free of charge. Even then would his act be bested by none other than Fizzarolli himself, like he had done so growing up.

…Fizzarolli…

The name vaguely piqued his interest, causing him to wonder exactly how that old friend of his was going. It was only very recently that they had made amends, having come to an understanding of each other. A sad, crooked smile spread faintly across Blitz's face; maybe he wasn't such a fuck-up as he thought he was. Weakly the imp reached into his pocket and felt his phone, fishing it out by the tips of his fingers before sliding it screen-up on his desk. The screen lit up when Blitz touched the surface of it, navigating through the device with his exhausted eyes until he reached a certain contact number, and thus put it on speed dial. Just as the phone began to buzz, Blitz allowed his head to flop against the table with a thud, having spent the remainder of his physical strength. After a few more buzzes, it ended and gave way to a voice: *"Hello?"*

With his eyes locked shut, Blitz managed to squeeze out a singular syllable; "Fizz..?"

"Yeah it's 'Fizz', who is this? Hold on a sec, whose number is-… Oh, Blitz! It's you!" Fizzarolli's gravely voice buzzed through the receiver with a sharp rise in enthusiasm; *"Hah! Sorry about that, man, I didn't realize who I was speaking to, ya sounded weird!"* When Blitz didn't reply immediately, Fizzarolli took this as an invitation to continue speaking; *"Hey-hey, what's up!"*

Try as Blitz might to form a complete sentence through his extreme depression, he couldn't find the energy nor the motivation to do so. "Life," Blitz murmured finally, finding the only word he could say.

"Ha- Yeah, I get that," Fizzarolli replied with dry humor, but still keeping up with his spirits; *"You sure you're okay over there? You sound like shit!"* This time when Blitz failed to reply, the fellow ex-circus imp seemed to sense that something was wrong, at least judging from the long pause and the next more serious question he asked; *"You, uh.. you good over there?"*

"…They took my daughter, Fizz."

"Wh-What?"

"Yeah. They took her from me. Just like that."

Fizzarolli's voice cracked for a second as he processed what had just been told to him; *"Wha- Who- What are you talking about, who did?"*

"Stolas, and Lucifer's.. I dunno, his "Top Guy" or whatever-the-fuck ya wanna call him. … They stole her from me, today," Blitz broke the news faintly, trying his best to support his heavy head using the palm of his hand as a crutch.

"Wait, so, when you mean stole, you mean—"

"I mean they took her from me, Fizz!" Blitz's voice rang out across the room as he shouted into the receiver; "They took her from me, for whatever goddamn reason they did! Now she's… she's been exiled, a-and I don't know why! They won't tell me shit!"

"Woah! Okay, Blitz, let's just hang on a minute here," was the response which came Blitz's way, attempting to reason with him; *"Let's just think clearly here. We-We can sort this out. Yeah, we can! I-Is that what you wanted me to do here?"*

“Maybe? I don’t fucking-… I just need someone on my side here, Fizz. You’re the only one I have left.” Blitz retreated into silence and gaze glassy-eyed towards his office door, perhaps trying to look past it out into the lobby. As he did so, Fizzarolli dared ask if his employees were of any assistance, to which Blitz replied in a low groan; “I just fired one of them.”

“Oh… Well shit… Uh…” The imp on the other end of the line began to stall, obviously trying his hardest to come up with an adequate response to a situation he had just been thrown into. Eventually he broke out of the involuntary stammer, and huffed; *“O-Okay look, I’ll… I’ll talk to Ozzie about this, fill him in with what’s going on. Maybe he can help us— well, you, sort this out.”*

A dry parted grin slithered across Blitz’s mouth once again; “Psh. Another royal. … Knowing who he is, he’s probably involved in this, too.”

“Okay wait on just a second,” Fizzarolli's voice bluntly stated; *“You don’t know that. Don’t go around accusing MY boyfriend about stuff like that, y’hear? He wouldn’t do that, I know him.”*

Blitz didn’t reply to this, in fact he didn’t even react; if he was in any way, shape or form affected by Fizzarolli’s quick defense, he didn’t show it. All in all, Blitz had truly become an emotionless husk, devoid of the things which made up who he was, for better or for worse. The drained imp leant back into his chair and brought his head along with him, allowing himself to gaze upwards towards the ceiling, the ceiling fan’s blades faintly turning above his head. Behind his vastly dulled and dead eyes, Blitz thought about turning the fan on the fastest setting it could go, then shoving his head into the midst of it, sending him into that darkness which he felt was his destiny — But Loona kept him alive. For as long as she was out there, he would continue on; with a struggle, sure, but would continue nonetheless. After a period of silence which was longer than needs be, Blitz spoke into his phone again; “Can you do that for me?”

Fizzarolli’s answer was cast iron; *“S-Sure! I just need you to be calm, alright? Don’t go do anything stupid.”*

“Aight. … Fizz?”

“Yeah?”

“…Promise you won’t leave my side on this.”

“I won’t, Blitz. I promise.”

“…Sure.”

Clik!

In a giant heave with much effort, Blitz hauled himself up from his chair and shuffled with leaden feet back out into the lobby, all the while calling out through his tired, raspy voice: “Millie. … Millie! … Mills? … S-Sallie?” Blitz’s hand met with the handle of the door and he pushed it wide open, expecting to be met with his remaining two employees. He was met with nothing; nothing but an empty room, his pistols sprawled out across the floor, and a patch of black blood where he had been shot. They had left him. Blitz was alone.

A deep regret overcame him.

A pitch black ceiling and the cathartic feeling of her battered body sunken back-first into a mattress is what greeted Loona when she finally awoke. To her, it was the best feeling in the world, the only feeling which she felt she would ever need; rest. The low chirp of a lone cricket somewhere outside also greeted Loona, along with the warmth of a blanket tucked comfortably around herself; she was no longer cold. While with all of her thanks she was no longer cold, the battered hellhound’s human-disguised body still ached horrifically, the pain from the bruises she had sustained coming forth to her now that consciousness had returned. With all things Loona considered in that moment, she wasn’t dead, that alone was a start. But in that ‘start’ she realized something else — Her ordeal wasn’t some nightmarish fever dream; it was real. Very real. In knowing that, Loona felt herself well up again, the urge to cry helplessly again coming forth but stopping right at the cusp.

Just then Loona realized that not all was dark within the room, for beyond the foot of her bed was a door. Just seeping through the crack of this door she had discovered was a warm orange-tinged light, giving the hellhound’s sore eyes a point to focus on. A faint feeling of gentle familiarity crept to the forefront of the sole occupant’s mind, before all of a sudden it dawned on Loona, an almost comforting realization; she was back in that old timber homestead that one James Steele called his home. Furthermore, where exactly she lay was what was her temporary accommodation, an accommodation which now seemed far less “temporary” — Talk about severe déjà vu. Just as she went to move despite her body’s protests, Loona felt something wrapped snugly around her head, finding that it was a cloth bandage once she brushed her fingers up against it, covering the trauma to her temple.

She must've made some sort of noise as before Loona knew it, the sound of growing footsteps against floorboards approached from beyond the door. As soon as they stopped, the knob turned and the door itself inched carefully open, and sure enough peering through from the other side was the property owner, looking just as exhausted as Loona herself was. He stood there quietly for a moment, perhaps trying to figure out whether Loona was lucid, made evident when he saw her peering right back at him through exhausted eyes. "Hey," the young Steele cautiously muttered.

At first Loona had no energy to reply, up until she rested her head back against the pillow. "…Is this real…" she finally asked in a groggy voice which was barely discernible.

Luckily for her ruined strength, Loona didn't need to repeat herself. "Yeah. Yeah, this-… this is real," Jim quietly assured.

"…Mmh… What time is it…"

"One-oh-seven, Ay-Em," the self-sufficient young man informed, still being hushed about his tone; "It's morning. You've been out for a while."

There was barely a reaction from Loona upon being told this, definitely on account of her being too weak to do much more than speak croakily like she was coming out from a hangover. In truth, the hellhound felt humiliated and unbecoming, the whole ordeal leaving her as a pathetic mockery of herself. She had no more energy for anger, wrath, nor malice — only dejection. A pitiful soft whimper which nearly died on her closed lips came from Loona as she breathed, her grim unfocused gaze fixated upon nothingness towards the ceiling. "I feel dead," she said in a whisper, but loud enough for the young man to hear.

"N-No, c'mon Loona," Jim tried to persuade; "Come off with that. Don't go saying that, you're not dead."

"But I feel it," Loona groaned again, closing her eyes momentarily to give them a rest; "I feel dead." As much as she knew it obviously pained Jim to hear an old friend of his talk about herself in this way, Loona knew he wouldn't argue the point from the lack of rebuke he returned. If she wanted to feel she was dead, so be it, the main thing is that she actually wasn't; in this, Loona felt a certain level of solace, a morsel of comfort in her pessimistic state. After all, it was pessimism which had kept her alive thus far, so why get rid of it now?

Jim covered his mouth to clear his throat, doing so before stating softly; “I brought something for you.” Loona only gave a dull-toned hum to this, not out of indifference or dismissal of the news, but rather out of a lack of communicating much else. The “human” woman listened to Jim’s footsteps shuffling against the floorboards as he navigated through the dark room, rounding to Loona’s side of the bed before setting something made of glass atop the bedside table. Not once did Loona find the strength to open her eyes again, even when he heard Jim say; “Got some straight rum for ya. Couldn’t find the coke, sorry ‘bout that. It might help with the pain, but… I dunno. I hope it does.”

To this Loona felt grateful, and even though it was a battle within its own right, she managed to peer through her heavy eyelids up towards Jim, seeing his face for the first time since waking up. He looked exhausted, the clammy look on his face being a testament to this. “D-Dude, holy shit,” Loona managed to comment, her tone hoarse from her own lingering exhaustion; “You look dead tired..”

“I know. I’m not sleeping though,” Jim asserted in a weak shake of his head; “Not until I know you’re alright.”

Loona didn’t know what to say to this and so remained silent, managing to hold her eyelids open in the weak squint she held them in. She lay there and contemplated on what to say, only for her to finally whimper; “I-I… I don’t-…” A faint tear rolled down the side of Loona’s cheek, the only one her eyes could conjur. “…I’m not-… Fuck, I’m so tired… Dude, I… I need help.”

“I guessed that much,” Jim replied in a hint of dry humor, though he knew how serious this was; “What happened to you, what’s with the bruises? A-And the bags, what is this?”

“…I’ve been exiled.”

“You’ve been what?”

“Exiled, Jim,” Loona winced in a short bout of pain, squeezing her eyelids shut before squinting them open again; “They… Th-They kicked me out, and I can’t go home. … They’ll kill me if I do.”

“Wh- you… What’re you talking about, who will?”

“…You know I’m not sure if I should tell you. You’re-… You’ll freak out if I tell you, I have a feeling.”

“Loona,” solid and assuring was the young man’s voice as he said the hellhound’s name. His hands inched towards Loona for a second as if to reach for her before retreating, considering her still weak condition. Not once did Jim’s words falter as he stated; “You have my word that I won’t freak out, yeah? I promise. As a friend, I promise.”

These were promising words, very promising; but for all it was worth, Loona wasn’t sure whether to trust his certainty. In spite of this, and knowing that he might well freak out, the disguised hound let out a shuddering breath, then said; “…Lucifer, Stolas… whoever’s associated with them… maybe anyone in Hell if they see me down there…”

The revelation seemed to hit Jim like a brick; “Lucifer?” When Loona meekly nodded her head, it had a profound impact on him — now did he realize just how precarious the situation was, not that he hadn’t already guessed. Jim shifted himself by his feet where he stood, and muttered gravely; “Christ, you’re kidding. Over what?”

“Here’s a better question,” Loona said with barely a tired whisper above her breath, her eyes threatening to roll back into her head before regaining focus; “Why’d you take me..?”

Jim was none the wiser; “To where?”

Loona began to sneer faintly, though it was barely noticeable. “The church,” she gruffly said in a shudder before wincing in pain once more; “That-… That fucking church. It was a.. dumb fucking idea for me to go. … It was. … C-Couldn’t you’ve just said that, smacked some sense into me? Now look at me..”

“You wanted to go, though,” Jim replied calmly and without accusation; “So I took you.”

There was no welcome reception to the statement. “So it’s my fault,” Loona wheezed, rolling her head towards the human standing over her; “Thi-This is my fault, is that what you’re saying?”

Jim shook his head; “I never said that, Loona, come on now. It’s nobody’s fault here.”

Loona wanted to be angry, she really wanted to be. The world had spat in her face and she wanted revenge, to pay out at someone or something for the inhumane wrong that had been done against her. But try as she might, she couldn't; especially not at an old friend. How could she? Loona's expression softened back into its near unreadable state. "Sorry," the bedridden hellhound whispered; "I'm just-… It's hopeless, I'm hopeless. My life's over." Shortly after Loona fell silent, a dry tired smile made of nothing but broken dreams crept across her lips. "Tsh… It's kinda funny, actually. Just as I thought that I had a shot in life, I-I end up like this. Right as I thought I was going somewhere, on the straight and narrow, I get… I get fucked over." Again Loona's words died off and was replaced by the same cricket from earlier chirping away outside. With an almost pleading look in her eyes, a plea for guidance perhaps, Loona whispered to Jim two words; "What now?"

A very good question, a sickeningly fitting question, a question which had a morbid and hopeless undertone, had just been raised. 'What now' is a pair of words reserved for the most directionless of people; for the destitute, the lost, and the maimed, of which Loona was all. In earnest Jim recognized this, knowing that the question now lay on his shoulders. He only had one response, one solution, which after giving it a second's thought he gave; "We keep going," the ponderous man said, shrugging his shoulders barely an inch — he was just as tired; "It's all we can do. Yanno ya can't just-… keel over, let them win. That's what they want you to do, ay? For you to lose hope."

"They've already won, then," Loona wheezed in her absence of energy, lethargically rubbing her eyes with her hand. Jim didn't know what to say to this, and neither did Loona know what to add. She didn't want to lose hope, that wasn't her, but life had only ever given her a raw deal time and time again, and this was yet another example. It was hard not to lose hope, especially in her hopeless condition. She hated feeling dilapidated.

For a while Jim stood there over Loona, shrouded with her in the dark, unsure of what else to say. This was until he sniffed and said, diverting the topic a little; "Anyhow I brought your bags in. They're all on the dresser, beside the door. Got a few things out for you; guitar, that horse toy, uh… your clothes. … I'll let you organize it how you want."

"Okay. … Can I sleep," Loona then asked raspily, peeking through her fingers; "If you could leave, let me sleep. J-Just for a… a few more hours, and I'll be fine." The look on Jim's face told Loona that he was hesitant to leave her alone with her thoughts; in this, she found comfort. She didn't feel too right in the head, accompanying the physical trauma. Recognizing this, Loona reconsidered her request, very well for her own safety; "Actually… Wait, can you stay? I want you to… stay. Yeah, just stay. … Just a little while… until I fall asleep."

To this the young man nodded his head; "Sure," he said quietly, shuffling through the darkness to a lone chair in the corner of the room. "I'll be right here," he assured again, calling over to Loona barely above a whisper.

Loona tried to form the words “thank you” but ended up giving in to exhaustion, allowing herself to lay there dormant in her humiliating condition. Soon she found herself falling back into liberating sleep, her eyelids acting like draw curtains for her eyes and her vision faded.

When the pale-skinned young woman woke up, the morning had advanced further, the first lights of the day proper peeking through the window just above the bed head. She could see even more of the bedroom now; the egg-white walls, the old-fashioned embroidery lining the corners of the off-white ceiling, the teak dresser beyond the foot of the bed with all of her belongings, and the empty chair to the far-right corner, the occupant having left evidently. Loona still felt dilapidated and helpless, but the aching sensation which struck her body hours ago had since faded with rest, left with only periodic pangs which came and went. There too was another change, one that was more subtle and external in nature, emphasis on ‘nature’; the solitary cricket that had been chirping those dark hours prior had been replaced by the mellow bubbling coo of a Mourning Dove.

Still feeling delirious though slightly less so, and gravely despondent by what unfolded the day prior, Loona felt that she had enough energy to lift herself up in bed, doing so in a slow and cautious way while being mindful of her injuries. Successfully Loona held herself upright, her back resting against the bed head with padded support from the pillows, giving her a full view of the room she now resided in, as well as the brownish-orange beverage resting on the bedside table. The young woman paid attention to it, looking at it casually before grabbing it to take a sip. Each swallow burned Loona’s throat as she drank needily, the taste of it gratifying her in a way that she sorely needed. The whole glass was empty in no more than ten seconds, ending with a soft gasp of relief from Loona before the empty vessel was plopped lazily beside her on the bedsheets. As the hellhound’s body processed the drink offered to her in the early hours of the morning, her mind got busy; “What now,” she asked herself over and over, mulling over it tenfold; “What now?”

Her thoughts were quickly interrupted by a light tapping on the door, barely a knock. Then came Jim’s voice, dampened and considerate in its tone and volume; “You awake?” The young man’s voice sounded almost unsure of himself, like he wasn’t sure whether it was a good idea to ask said question.

“Uh.. Ye-Yeah, I’m awake,” Loona replied shakily, still trying to process the reality of where she was.

“How’re you this morning, you alright?”

"…No," was the disguised hellhound's honest reply, who began looking over the few bruises on her arms — they were only few and far between, but by God did they look awful. Then to Jim, in a 'return to sender' sort of way, came a question; "Wh-What are you doing up, I thought you were sleeping."

"I only needed a few hours, I'm fine," Jim assured from the other side; "I'm making food. Do you, uh… you want anything?"

"I don't-… I don't know," Loona said in a lethargic half-mutter, her appetite completely nonexistent for the time being. There came no verbal reply to her response, instead hearing Jim's footsteps shuffle shyly away from the other side, leaving the weary hound to her own devices.

And her own devices Loona did entertain. She began to contemplate her next move, figuring that despite her depressing state she couldn't just keel over and die in someone else's bed. Instead Loona decided, begrudgingly, that she needed to move. Her eyes, now with newly-regained twenty-twenty sight, gravitated to the dresser where her clothes lay in a pile beside her sizable duffle bag, waiting just for her to sort them as she pleased. There was much hesitation to move, but eventually Loona forced herself, cautiously swinging her bare feet out from under the covers and down flat onto the floor. The sheer chill of the floorboards alone made Loona wish that she had the strength to change back into her hellhound form, at least then would she have fur. She was uneasy on her feet at first, but soon she grew confident enough to make it across the room in a light, slightly unsteady shuffle.

With much success Loona made it to the dresser, and in one piece at that! She looked over her pile of clothes and the dresser drawers they lay atop of, creating a mental image of where she deemed them suitable to go. Soon Loona got to putting them away as neatly as possible, all the while she made absolutely sure that she wouldn't fall over at any point, not entirely trusting her balance as of yet. With clothes over and done with, Loona's oversized and over-packed duffle bag was just about half empty, the remaining things being a shoddily-packed array of belongings that were quickly stuffed inside; packed not by herself, but by those who had cast her out. One of these things, placed haphazardly beside a shampoo bottle that had half-exploded due to the weight of Loona's luggage, was a framed photograph. It wasn't just any old photograph either, but one that made the hellhound go rigid as soon as her red-iris eyes set upon it. There was no doubt in Loona's mind in figuring out what it was, even with the soapy internals of the shampoo bottle smeared across it like an amateur's mimic of post-modernist artwork.

And behold, lying beneath the mess, mockery manifested.

The sheer fact that they decided to pack it in with the rest of her stuff felt nothing short of mockery — they were mocking her. Psychological warfare had been declared on her personally, and there was nothing she could do about it. Loona felt sick, tremendously so, just staring at this example of barbaric and blatant gestured derision, feeling herself well up once more; luckily she had no tears left, the last one having been expunged the night before. *"What now,"* Loona began to mull again, hyperfocusing on it as she swiped the mess off the frame's glass, then set the cleaned photograph upright on the antique dresser; *"What now?"*

Square One (Pt. I)

“Yeah, uh, I wouldn’t say she’s alright, not yet. But she’s alive yanno, uh… conscious as well, so there’s that,” Jim said as he paced aimlessly around his living room, his mobile phone held up to his ear.

A good five hours had passed since both Loona and Jim himself had awoken, the time having properly advanced into the early minutes past nine o’clock. The property owner and now part-time hospice carer had received a call less than a couple minutes before, the caller being one curious but nevertheless courteous Father Aleksander.

In an aimless uneven line Jim paced from one end of the living room to the next, then pausing to glance into the hallway where Loona’s bedroom door lay in sight. “Yeah, she’ll be fine I think,” Jim told the caller; “Few days' rest will do her good, hopefully. That bruise on her head’s sorta worrying me, but she seems stable considering.” Intently the pacer listened in to what the caller had to say, paying much attention to the sudden proposal that was being presented to him. Jim narrowed his eyes when the full details were handed out, considering it carefully: “Uh… Yeah I think hold off from that for the moment, give her some space. … Yeah nah, well, she isn’t too happy with the idea of seeing you lot for now. She’s in shock, so…” Just as the young Steele began to pace leisurely again, Father Aleksander gave yet another offer, to which Jim replied; “Nah I’m alright with her, that’s all good. If I do need that though, I’ll shout for ya. … Yeah thanks Father. … Alright, see ya.” The few-minute call ended without another word, all that needed to be said having been said. *“Loona, Loona, Loona…”* a lingeringly exhausted Jim murmured under a particularly exasperated breath, running the palm of his hand down his bristly face which was begging for a shave.

The tired young man paused just as he reached the entrance into the hallway, again pondering on whether it was a good idea to bother an exhausted and obviously shaken Loona. As much as he wanted to check on her wellbeing, Jim wanted to do so without running the risk of making matters worse by bringing it up. He thought about how to go about the wellness check while moving again, venturing right up to Loona’s door until he was no more than an inch away. For a few cautious seconds Jim listened in, hearing nothing in the ways of movement or any signs that the tenant was doing much. That was when the “landlord” made his move, a soft tapping knock against the door; “Loona,” he gently called out, being courteous with his tone of voice.

At first there was no reply which struck Jim as mildly concerning, but soon enough he heard a response; not a word, but a short audible hum from Loona to indicate that she was still alive.

In a short sigh of relief, Jim looked to the ground with hands gripped to his hips, considering his wording before cutting to the chase; “You okay in there,” he asked.

Again, a short muffled hum. Not only was Loona still alive, but it was obvious now that she was also lucid, as evident by these short nonverbal responses.

"How's, uh…" Jim floundered for a second, a sudden shot of hesitancy temporarily interrupting his ability to speak. Quickly he overcame it to avoid any awkwardness; "So how's your head?"

"…Sorta better. Still hurts like shit," Loona's muffled croaky voice replied, speaking for the first time that morning proper. She still sounded very tired and above all depressed about the whole experience thus far, but to a certain minimal extent she sounded a whole yard's better, even if said yard in reality was really no more than an inch.

Increasingly encouraged by Loona's improving lucidity, a sign that she was on the road to recovery, Jim said with continued carefulness; "Ahem- Sorry to ask again, but eh.. you want me to get you anything? Anything at all."

There came a break in the two-way communication between Jim and Loona when Loona fell silent, though in Jim's mind he assumed that she was giving his offer a think. His assumption came true, when after a couple seconds of quiet pondering, Loona piped up again; *"I'm hungry."* There came the sound of the hellhound's queen-sized bed frame shifting from weight being relieved from the mattress, followed by the soft thudding of bare footsteps. Loona's muffled voice called out again, still dreary in the way she spoke; *"You got anything..?"*

"Ye-Yeah, sure," Jim confirmed, stepping an inch back from the door, expecting Loona to come out any second; "I got a bitta steak leftover, if you want that. Gonna have to cook it fresh though."

In a furthermore encouraging sign that the old Loona was returning slowly but surely, Jim heard her scoff a little. *"I'm not a dog, Jim,"* Loona lightly joked from within the room despite her sorry state; *"Well I am, kinda, but… look you know what I mean. I-I'll have that, thanks… Just something, anything. My stomach's killing me."*

"Aight, I'll get to it," Jim obliged, getting poised to leave; "You coming out?"

"Yeah-yeah, soon. Soonish, just let me… let me get my bearings," Loona stammered from within the room, then came the sound of the dresser's drawers sliding open.

With a mute nod of his head Jim left Loona to her privacy and made headways to the kitchen as the designated cook. Cooking wasn't an alien thing to the man of two decades, though doing so for others on a regular basis certainly was, being a man who spent most of his time at home alone. In saying this it wasn't like serving others was foreign to the Steele Family — As stories passed on through the decades have told him, Jim's great grandfather, and his father before him, happened to be a 'Station Cook' out on the cattle trails. Such were the proud stories of the Steele Family, including one more vaguely detailed one which came from James Steele's 'Station Cook' great-great-grandfather, Lewis Steele. Though it was only ever told in as previously mentioned 'vague' recollections, Lewis had volunteered into the Australian Army in the latter years of the First World War. He didn't come back until late November of 1919, and upon being asked what it was like over in that faraway continent, old Lewis Steele would only ever say one firm conviction: *"'Twas flaming cold up North!"* At least, that was the story.

In barely any time at all a slab of steak was sizzling nicely upon a heated and oiled pan atop a stove, with Jim standing idly by having just set it down. As he began to cook, another faint sound began coming from Loona's room, one that the newly-minted chef could tell was the unmistakable single-noted strums of a guitar. Jim couldn't tell whether the recluse was playing a particular tune, or if she was mindlessly strumming the chords, as noise to block out whatever no-doubt troubled thoughts whirled around in her head. Soon the strumming stopped, followed by the sound of the door opening, then footsteps trudging lightly to the kitchen, stopping a few feet behind the human.

Jim needn't turn around to know who it was; "I just put it on, sorry. Might need to give it a few minutes," he informed before turning around. There beyond the counter stood Loona, still in her human form with the bandage he had wrapped around her head still snugly in place. She looked much the same, except for one notable yet slight difference; the bruises along her body, most notably on her arms, stomach, and face, had begun to fade. Jim took note of this, raising his eyebrows an inch and said; "You look better."

"I heal quickly," Loona blandly stated, then involuntarily unleashed a yawn; "You know, just demon shit. We heal faster, but it takes the energy out of you."

"Yeah well, all the more reason for you to sit down," Jim said, placing his hands against the counter; "Can you stand?"

The pale woman shrugged; "Sort of," she huffed; "Still recovering though, so. Can't sit down anymore." Loona took notice of Jim's phone resting screen-up atop the kitchen counter as it lit up from its owner's hand nudging it by chance. She saw that a 'missed call' message from ten minutes ago still lay unread on the Lock Screen. "Who was that," Loona asked, loosely gesturing to the screen.

“Don’t worry ‘bout it. Was just Father Aleksander, he called about you,” Jim said.

“Right,” Loona grunted and began to sneer; “Did you tell him to fuck off and die?”

Jim gave the gothic woman an unimpressed look; “Loona.”

Loona scoffed; “What? Yo-You want me to be nice and tolerable to the reason why I’m in this mess??”

“He called to see if you were fine,” Jim tried to explain in the most polite yet firm way possible, trying to snap Loona out of her emerging outburst.

But Loona had other ideas; “Fine?! Oh I’m fine, just fine! Hah- I’m just hunky-fucking-dory, definitely not living in a world of shit right now!”

“Loona, I appreciate the fact you’re really in the shit, but can you stow it? The way ya going, you’re gonna pass out, and I’m not in the mood to see you hit ya head.”

“Don’t tell me what to—…” Before she could say anymore Loona caught her tongue, going stone-faced for a second to consider what Jim had said. As much the hound wanted to argue her point, she knew that the man was right. Loona capitulated on the argument, and said bluntly; “Fine, sure. But I’m not interested in whatever babble HE has to say. Next time that old bastard calls, you hang up.”

“Yep,” Jim ‘obeyed’, knowing that this was a dead-end argument that neither of them would win.

In an exhausted laborious heave Loona propped herself up onto the barstool standing beside her, letting out a gasp of relief as she sat down; as it turned out she did need to sit. Jim said nothing to this and instead went back to cooking, flipping Loona’s tender rib eye steak in one near flawless turn of the tongs. The smell of freshly cooked premium meat permeated the air, smoking out the ghoulish scent of despair and suffering that lingered from the night before, and continued to pollute. There Loona sat in a state she would’ve never considered herself to be in. Still none of what had happened or where she was felt real, like she was going to wake up at any moment to find

herself back in the apartment — but she never woke up. Forget this being some “dream”, this was a nightmare in a coma. Involuntarily Loona found herself murmuring something to herself; a horrifying thought verbalized, a theory that could very well be reality.

Loona’s mutterings were barely above the sound of sizzling meat, so it was a miracle that Jim managed to hear it, prompting him to turn around to find one dazed-looking roommate. “What’s up,” he said to investigate.

Without even raising her eyes which stared aimlessly down at the counter, Loona muttered something daunting; “Dad might be dead, man.”

Jim froze in place when he heard this, his mind trying to process what exactly this meant even though the words were crystal clear. He knew exactly what Loona meant, but he couldn’t quite believe it to be true — so too did Loona, by the looks of things. He lowered his brow and looked deeply at the pale-faced woman; “What makes you think that,” he asked with utmost caution in delivery.

“The fact I saw him aiming at them,” Loona whispered raspily, her breath shuddering; “He-… Before I blacked out, we were all in a standoff. I went to trip one of them, I stumbled, whirled around to see Blitz with his guns out. … Holy fuck, he might be… No, he can’t be, he can’t-… fuck.” When Loona did finally look up, she stared at Jim with eyes which withheld a Thousand-Yard stare, and her mouth was locked tightly shut in a vice grip. She looked less like she was about to cry, and more like she was about to go into some form of paralytic shock.

Wordlessness overcame them both as did the deeply solemn dead silence which fell in tandem. Neither of them knew what to make of what could very well be reality, the mutual feeling being a coagulation of confusion and fear, causing the air to become muggy with tension. Jim took the helm of the situation, and pushed out warily; “Now hang on, you don’t-… You don’t know if he is. If he was, these people would’ve told you, yeah? The-They would’ve said something to rub it in, surely.”

Loona glared blankly at the man standing across from her; “They didn’t tell me shit,” she phrased with a straight face. Vacancy was all that was left behind on Loona’s face, especially her eyes, making Jim feel that her earlier self-assessment of “feeling dead” rang more true than he initially thought. The hellhound denied her right to live peacefully glanced over to the stove top; “Is it almost done,” she asked with a continuous hunger.

“Should be, almost,” the cook told her, glancing over to the thick cut of beef to have a look himself. He was just about to console Loona further on the possibility of Blitz being dead, but something about the way she looked — exhausted and sapped of energy — told him to leave it alone. There were other more present issues to deal with, that which he would bring up a little later when the time was right — for now, Jim had a traumatized hellhound to nurse back to health. The thought of Blitz, that insufferable red oaf who he had crossed paths with, the very idea of him being dead stuck with him; not because of much sympathy for the imp himself, but for what it meant for his now battered and outcast daughter.

Time passed in a sluggish drag but eventually Loona’s medium-rare rib eye was ready, the slab of savory meat being sprinkled with a pinch of salt and pepper as per Loona’s order before being handed over to her. Jim stood there in slight awkwardness and asked; “Didja want anything else, or…”

“No,” Loona meagrely said, barely making eye contact as she infirmly shook her head; “No, this is… **huff-** this is fine. It’s fine, thank you.” She weakly grabbed the fork handed over to her and began pushing the curved end into her food, watching the remnants of blood pool around it on the ceramic dish. Lamely Loona curved the fork into the steak and divided a small chunk from itself, stabbing the scanty portion before sliding it into her mouth, then chewing it slowly. Juicy and delicious was the taste which greeted Loona’s taste buds, causing her to be pleasantly surprised in the midst of her mental and physical anguish; as it turns out, sometimes life did throw her a bone, even if it was a feeble bone against the crushing weight of its cruelness. After swallowing her first portion Loona took another measly bite, practically zoning out to everything around her. That was until she snickered sadly to herself and remarked out loud; “Funny, isn’t it? Just as I get back to life as usual, luck comes around and curbstomps me. Now look at me… sitting here, beaten, humiliated, just chowing down on this… with a dead dad, most likely. … Now what. I know I’ve already said it, but seriously. Where the fuck do I go from here?”

“That’s what we gotta work out,” Jim huffed and pursed his lips.

Loona sighed, her breath still shaky, and finally looked up towards the old unlikely friend. “You know how humiliating it is that I have to rely on you again,” the hellhound asked somberly; “Back to square one, just like that. But this is even worse than square one, this is me starting from literal scratch. Like I got a phone that’s blacklisted, a wallet with barely anything in it, and now I’ve got no job, no family, nothing! Now I’m back here, being a burden on you, and everyone, and—…” Loona had to force herself to calm down, biting her quivering lip and tightening her raised hand into a fist to expel her rising frustration. Maintaining as much calm as she possibly could, Loona corrected herself; “Sorry. I’m just tired, I need to-... fuck, what do I do? I’m stuck.”

There was no arguing this, even Jim accepted it despite his modicum offers of hope which paled in the face of Loona’s reality, her reality being his too. Again for the second time in five minutes Jim found himself tongue-tied, even more at a loss for words than was previously thought possible.

Sadly there were many things he couldn't help out with, except for one; employment. When the smoke had cleared and the time was right, Jim had the intention to return independence to Loona in the form of seed capital. It wasn't going to be full independence as it looked like she was going to be living with him from now on, but it would be self-sufficiency nevertheless. But where would she work? That would be a question for a far more appropriate time.

In mutual pensive silence Loona and Jim sat together, their mouths in drought from a lack of words; doubts, assurances, or otherwise. It was like this for minutes on end, but before it was sure that the sixth minute would be spent mutely like its five brothers, Jim found within himself the courage to speak; "I was gonna head into town today, do some things. You alright here on your own?"

Loona poised her shoulders to shrug; "I'll just have to be," she muttered breathily, practically forcing herself to reply, then took one of the last few bites of her breakfast.

Jim replied with a barely audible "alright" and lifted himself up from the counter he found himself leaning over, then turned to head for his room. Loona didn't protest Jim leaving as she had in the early hours that morning, nor did she look his way as he reluctantly left her vicinity, the distance growing between them as Jim disappeared through the living room and down the hallway. Again the hellhound prodded her steak which was now barely two mouthfuls worth, deciding then that it was best to stuff the rest in her mouth as is, rather than cut it in two. Lazily chewing the final bit of her food away, Loona continued to stare off into space; her face unreadable, her mind desolate, and her body numb. The stillness that reigned supreme around her was hard to overstate, acting like an invisible lead-laced blanket that acted as the hellhound's imprisoning sarcophagus.

But with every sarcophagus comes a crack in the masonry. As Loona swallowed her last morsel of steak, a shimmer of sunlight drifted across the corner of her eye, causing her to flinch and blink. Rubbing her affected eye, Loona craned her head around behind her, finding the window at the far end of the living room staring right back, the sandy beige curtains having been pulled back for a view of the outside world. The morning thus far had been largely cloudy, so the appearance of direct sunlight signaled to the observer that the sky was clearing up. Like the light breaking through the mugginess of the morning, almost as if the sight of it was enough, Loona felt a renewed energy within herself from seemingly out of nowhere, though it was very little. The disguised hellhound put this energy to good use, carefully lifting herself up from the tall wooden barstool and shuffling with an unsure step towards the oddly enchanting light. It was as if the sunlight was patiently waiting for her, a patience well-placed as Loona managed to carefully shuffle all the way up to the window.

Waiting before her beyond the pane and grilles, and out beyond the veranda was the same old world she had seen before, lit up gloriously underneath the morning sun as if to boast its nature. The scene was much the same to Loona; same trees, same open grass fields, the same road beyond the property, the same dried creek just beyond the treeline, and the same tall hills off in the distance.

But it felt different; a difference that told her with great assurance that this was her home from now on. Loona hadn't the energy to protest this thought, accepting it in her hopelessness. As she gazed stone-faced out at the powerfully familiar scene, the hellhound figured in her grief that this was life; that is, life as a whole is just one big familiarity with little difference in between. Almost as if life — memories, experiences, feelings, or perhaps everything — is an eternal circle, which repeats and repeats itself.

And it repeats and repeats itself.

"Oh come on, Roy, there's gotta be something! Surely!" For the past few minutes later that morning, this was Jim's desperate plea; trying to find work on behalf of a second party.

But Roy — Jim's balding, middle-aged longtime employer in the profession of shooting wild pigs and carpentry — shook his head as he sat there behind his desk; "Sorry Jim, but there's nothin' for her. Literally nothin'. Yanno me, if I had somethin' for her I'd tell ya straight away! But I haven't got squat, I'm sorry mate."

Jim stumbled over his words, trying to think of an adequate compromise; "Well, like-… ah fucken — can you at least put her name down, then contact me when something comes up?"

"I'd love to," Roy assured; "But with what, just a name? Does she have a Tax File Number, a bank account, Email, uh… an address, postal or otherwise? Anythin'?"

"Argh… Not really, no."

Roy became visibly incredulous, extremely so; "You mean to tell me she's got nothin' at all? Exactly zilch?"

"…Apparently, yeah."

Disbelief froze Roy in place for a second before he blinked and said with a huff; "Well see that's the other thing. How the hell am I gonna pay a woman who's got literally nothin' under her name?

How the fuck does that happen anyway, not having any address or anythin'? Unless she's on the run, then…"

"She's not a criminal, Roy," Jim was quick to correct; "Look she's in a tight spot, and now living with me. I need to help get her back up on her feet when she can. She'll take anything!"

"Mate, again, I've got zilch to offer her," Roy again affirmed, before hoisting himself up from his swivel chair and shuffled his middle-aged body towards the front door, signaling Jim to follow. Of course Jim did, following his boss through the office door and out into the dirt and gravel-based yard. "I admire ya enthusiasm to help this chick," Roy first commended as he walked beside his employee; "But if she's got no contact details, ID, or a bank account at the very least, I can't do much for her. And honestly, neither can you. Sometimes there's people ya can't do much for in the way of helpin'. And I'm not sayin' this 'Loona' chick is a criminal! Like, okay. Yanno Daniel, right? Dano, the chippy?"

Jim nodded along; "Yeah?" A part of him hoped that, by a slim chance, that whatever point was being made could be used to get Loona over the line

"Mate, he was in prison for five years for drug dealin," Roy explained to prove his developing point; "Not only that, but he got charged with attempted battery, assault, and harmin' a police officer. Right? I'm just sayin' so yanno that I'd give anyone a chance! But see, Dano at least had a sign-off from the rozzers sayin' he could work; your roommate's fucken bone dry!"

"Yerr, it's a bittuva problem," Jim reluctantly agreed, placing his hands on his hips as he stood. With the toe of his brown dress boot the young man lightly kicked up the dirt, then asked with dampened optimism; "So, like, what do ya think we should do here?"

Roy hacked up a lung and spat at the floor, then wiped his mouth before saying; "Get 'er an ID and a bank account for starters. But that shit takes ages to go through, by the time them public servants get off their arses…" The middle-aged man froze for a second as he seemed to remember something, before rapidly changing course; "Oh yeah, listen! Speakin' of jobs an' all that, I got this twenty-four-hour contract goin' for ya over the weekend. It's a property just south-west of here. Farmer's needin' a cleanup of a few feral pigs he's seen wonderin' around his land, wants a good strong firing arm to take care of 'em. Whadya reckon, Jim, ya up for it?"

"Well I need the money, hey," Jim said, confirming his willingness; "When's he asking for me to be up there?"

“Err… Soon as possible, he said. Preferably in the next twenty-four to forty-eight, dependin’ when ya free. He’s offerin’ to pay around five hundred, so—” Just as Roy said this his phone began to blare, the audible vibrating tone muffled within the pocket of his work trousers. He fished his phone out from its pocket and excused himself, wandering off a few good feet from his employee.

With a wandering eye Jim glanced to his boss talking on the phone, watching him pace around in a semicircle then paused as if he had just received news. Even from the distance between them, Jim could make out the words “just like that” phrased as a question wrapped in disbelief, the look on the middle-aged man’s face also suggesting that something was amiss. The phone call didn’t take long to end, and after one more mutual expression of disapproval with the caller, Roy hung up and sauntered back to link up with his youthful gun-for-hire. “Sorry ‘bout that,” Roy excused himself.

Jim didn’t pay too much mind to it, instead waving his hand; “Nah boss, it’s all good. Who was it?”

“No one, just me sister,” the aging man said near dismissively; “Babysitter’s just bailed out on her for next week. Said she didn’t wanna do it anymore, up and left for Hobart.”

“Done a runner,” Jim remarked as he sniffed; “Yeah nah, typical.”

“Yeah, that’s just how it…” The steady flow of words from Roy’s mouth came to an abrupt halt and he stood there slack-jawed, standing with a stillness induced only by deep thought. Something seemed to tick over in the beer-gutted specimen of a man’s brain, his eyes shifting to the right before coming to a head. As it seemed that something had connected in Roy’s brain, he turned back to Jim with a pointed finger and said; “She’d take anythin’, yeah?”

Immediately Jim knew what the hair-brained idea was; “Wh— Babysitting?? Roy, to be frank, I really don’t think Loona’s the babysitting type.”

“Hey, I’m just puttin’ it out here! If she’s really that desperate as ya say, she might wanna consider it. ‘S barely work, just watchin’ an eight-year-old for twenty-four in case she gets up to mischief. It’s for next Friday, so she’s got seven days to consider, plentya time! The sister pays well for it too — Three-Hundred ‘n Fiddy Dollars.”

“Well I mean it is money. It is a job… Ah, Jesus… Alright, you know what? I’ll run it by her, see if she’s up for it,” Jim told his decades-older counterpart, but then added with a pointed finger of his

own; “No guarantees though. She’s stubborn, set in her ways a bit.”

“Well she better get out of it if she wants work,” Roy let out with a wide smirk so brief; “But what say you, squire? Ya up for that contract, tomorrow or Sunday?”

“Yeah fucken, of course I am,” Jim nodded; “Tell old mate I’ll be down there tomorrow arvo, around two.”

“Righto, I’ll let him know,” Roy obliged then handed the “bane of wild pigs” a slip of paper from out his other pocket, upon it being an address written in remarkably neat cursive. “Yanno where this is, right,” the scruffy one of the pair made sure to check.

After mulling over it for a few seconds, then looking out into an unspecified spot in the distance, Jim began to nod; “Yeah, I reckon so. I’ll find it.”

“There’s a good lad,” Roy beamed in banterous spirits with a half-grin as he sent Jim on his way for the morning; Fridays were usually a very slow day for both employee and employer, so the workday was cut short if there was work to begin with. “Oh and mate,” Roy quickly shouted out before Jim could leave, prompting him to pause and turn around; “Good luck with that woman, yeah? She sounds like work!”

“Could say that again,” Jim half muttered as he again turned to leave, his boots kicking up a trail of dust as he went. Only one thing was on his mind as he jumped in his pickup and pulled out onto the road; whether Loona herself would accept the offer, alternative choice or not.

Loona, still in her human guise, lay completely flat on Jim’s couch as he stood there, having delivered the news to her. She hadn’t the motivation to tilt her head, leaving her staring blankly up at the ceiling in an indeterminate spot. The silence was loud as Loona remained mute, before finally: “…Go on. I’m waiting for the punchline.”

Jim shook his head, and sighed like he had expected this flicker of resistance; “There’s no punchline, Loona. That’s your only option.”

The pale woman's expression didn't change, remaining completely devoid of emotion as she closed her eyes and exhaled through her nose. "You and I both know that's the *worst* idea ever," Loona flatly stated; "Babysitting? Like I don't even know whether my dad is alive, I'm practically bankrupt and homeless, I'm stressed like never before, and that boss of yours thinks I can babysit some goddamn kid..?"

"It was only a suggestion, Loona," Jim assured the couch's sprawled-out occupant; "But you've got no other option, I'm sorry. Unless I give you a sum my pay, which I can do for ya, but that still leaves you outta work."

"Jim, respectfully, I couldn't give less of a fuck about work right now," Loona affirmed with a tone devoid of all hope, the apparent only option available to her rubbing salt into her accumulation of progressively healing bruises. The feeble high-pitched wailing of a child barely a year old echoed in Loona's head, acting as a mocking reminder of what had happened barely a few days prior. She bit her lip to prevent herself from crying anymore, even too exhausted to weep any further. The thought of kids repulsed her on any other day, but now all it did was make her feel a deep grief and sadness she had never known before. "Babysitting… Almost orphaned a kid, and he thinks I could go do that," the hellhound subconsciously confessed.

The words at first didn't register to Jim, but when they did he had to double-take; "You almost what sorry?" But Loona wasn't listening, looking as though she was dead to the world. In a certain sense, she very much was. Accepting that she wouldn't elaborate, Jim didn't press on, instead leaving the lethargic hound to her peace, or what little peace she had. With a soft assurance to Loona that he would be around, Jim quietly made his way through to an unspecified part of the house.

And so Loona lay there, dormant and wholly immobile, unable and unwilling to move by much, the weight of her doomed situation hopelessly unbearable. For an absolute certainty Loona knew that she was alone — that was until the sound of sniffling came, jittering from somewhere just outside her peripheral. It less startled the wounded hellhound and more intriguing her, giving her enough motivation to hoist herself upright with forced effort, then lethargically turned her head to the right.

To Loona's intrigue, she saw herself; that is, a younger version of herself, and in her true form at that. Her white and gray fur was matted, sickly, and peppered with grime, her head of silver hair as well tangled in a wiry mess. Her clothes too were of the same poverty-stricken condition; dirty, faded, peppered with holes. These clothes Loona remembered well, all too well. Tears streamed down the younger hellhound's face as she tried time and time again to wipe them away with her wrists, only to be replaced with even more trickling beads, staining her cheeks. A feeble, squeaking cacophony of hiccups and sniffles tumbled from the little hellhound's quivering lips, shaking like she was feeling the torturous onset of frostbite.

To Loona it felt like an eternity of watching her younger self stand there, only to weep and sob, the temptation to say something so strong yet so far out of reach. Eventually, after much sobbing and hopelessly wiping away tears, Loona's younger self peered at her with meek, bloodshot eyes, and finally croaked with a heartbreaking quiver; "..A-a… Are we- **snff** Are we going t-to be- **snff-hic** o-okay..?"

Loona stared intently at her younger destitute self, and for the first time in hours her expression changed, a hopeless and heartache-induced frown bowing her lips downwards. The hellhound, left bruised and helpless, wanted to say a million things to herself; of comfort, hope, and words to help her keep going. But these words would all be lies — Loona couldn't just lie to herself, after all the lies and deceit she had been through already. And so, after mustering up the courage to do so, the gothic "human" shook her head and regretfully admitted the cold, hard truth; "I don't know."

Midday was soon upon Jim as he leant back-first against the wall of his veranda, examining the address with an attentive eye. He knew of the address having passed it numerous times, and from the few times he paid particular attention to it, he knew the entrance was a long dirt driveway, leading up to a sizable raised homestead some five-hundred yards away. The man who lived there was one Trevor Pike, a wheat farmer and the fifth generation of his profession who was now fresh in the sixth decade of his life. Jim, having familiarized himself with the address, had to make one final call back to work, and so speed-dialed for Roy, resting the phone up to his ear.

The phone buzzed a couple of times until it ceased abruptly, replaced by the audio-compressed voice of the portly-built blue collar; *"Yeah, hello?"*

"Yeah Roy, it's Jim here. So with Pike, does he know I'm coming this weekend?"

"Ahh… No, not yet, but I'll give 'im a call in an hour. Didja have another set time, or still around two?"

"Yeah, still two, around then," Jim confirmed as he scooted towards the veranda railings, leaning his body against it by the length of his right arm. "'S fucken cold this morning, innit," the young man pointed out as he gazed out into his porchside view.

"Nah, it's a bit nippy," Roy felt inclined to agree; *"So how about that chick, what's she think about the job?"*

“Err… I’ll ask her a bit later,” Jim said as he scratched the side of his face; “She’s not in the best shape yet, so. Maybe later she’ll have a change of heart, I dunno. I’ll let ya know either way.”

“Fair nuff. Oh hey, wanna hear somethin’ nuts?”

“Yeah, go on.”

“Ya shoulda stayed around and waited for this dickhead in a suit to come in!”

“Dickhead in a suit?”

“Yeah, fair dinkum! Right so this fuckhead in shades came in a few minutes after ya left, yeah? Comes right up into me office when I’m in the middle of somethin’, an’ he starts yappin’ about how he’s an agent for… some groupa people, I don’t fucken know. Definitely not in this country. Anyhow he’s wearin’ this cheap suit and has this stupid fucken swept-back hairstyle, didn’t even do it right. So he starts tryna ask these questions, but he ended up giving up when he realized I wouldn’t listen. Sounded agitated though as he left, started swearin’ about me. Dumb cunt, hey?”

“What kinda questions?”

“Psh— Fuck if I know. I wasn’t even payin’ attention, ay?”

“Right, shit. Yeah, you get strange people. What was he, like government?”

“Nah nah, he specifically said he wasn’t. Look I dunno, just thought I’d tell ya. He was kinda a highlight for me, strange cunt.”

“Yeah, you get that. Alright Roy, just let Pike know I’ll be seeing him tomorrow arvo.”

“No worries, mate, I’ll catch ya on.”

“Righto, cheers.”

Square One (Pt. II)

It was late in the afternoon when Loona awoke, having fallen asleep sometime before midday; the whole day had pretty much been spent between a state of sleep and uneasy lethargic consciousness. Unlike the previous hours however, Loona felt as though she felt that bit more energized; still wholly depressed over what had happened barely twenty-four hours ago, but rested enough to move more than a few feet. The bandage wrapped around her head still sat snugly around her cranium, the blood that had seeped onto it having since dried and clotted, thus allowing the wound to her forehead to begin healing. The pillow which Loona had been resting on practically stuck to her head with how long she had been lying on it, coming up with the back of her head by an inch before falling back down onto the armrest. If Loona's joints were made of steel, they would be wailing loudly with how stiff she felt, a laborious effort having to be made until she was completely upright, but not before groaning in dull pain. Before long the disguised hound planted her feet on the ground, and for the first time since her near-death experience she stood up with relative ease, her footing absent of any tremor — an improvement for sure.

With regained strength and alertness Loona looked around the lit-up living room, finding nobody in sight; even her younger self had disappeared. For a second Loona wondered if Jim had completely left her, only to then catch the distinctive scent of burning firewood. From what she could tell with her uninhibited exceptional sense of smell, the hellhound knew it was coming from somewhere outside. And so that's where Loona headed, shuffling herself away from the couch, through the hallway whose lights above head were on, and out onto the veranda illuminated by an electric lamp mounted on the wall to her right. The afternoon had well and truly retreated, since turned into the early hours of evening, and save for the open iron fire pit a few feet away from the veranda's steps, Jim's land was covered in hastily settling darkness. Sure enough Loona found Jim sitting in front of the fire pit, having nestled himself into the depths of a camping chair he had set up, with a second one placed on the opposite side — obviously it was for her. With nothing else to do, Loona crossed the veranda and ventured down the steps towards the fire pit, her body still aching from time to time.

It didn't take long for Jim to notice Loona, who nodded to her and greeted; "Evening."

"Hey," was all that Loona managed to say as she slumped into her reserved seat, lowering herself down carefully while being mindful of her healing bruises. The newly kindled fire was warm against the gothic woman's pale skin, soothing her with how embracing and comforting it felt in contrast to the evening's dropping temperatures. In another first for Loona that day, she started up a very light conversation; "What're you doing out here?"

"Just sitting," Jim said in reply, letting off a casual faint shrug before dusting the lap of his trousers; "Figured I would. Sit out here, set up a fire. 'S alright weather for it, out here. … How're you feeling?"

“I’m still alive,” Loona muttered in flat optimism as she began to gaze into the fire; “Still feel drained, but… Hey, I’m still here. Got more strength back, so I’m able to move better. I know it’s not much of an answer, but…”

This in turn was a cause for a slow, approving nod from Jim; “That’s good. Yeah, that’s… that’s a start, for sure. … Ugh, Jesus Christ…”

Like darts, Loona's eyes honed into Jim’s face, away from the lively glow of the fire pit’s flames; “What? What do you mean ‘Jesus Christ’, what’s that for?”

“Whadya want me to say, Loona? Look at you, look at us.”

“You don’t have to rub it in,” Loona said non-accusatory as she slumped further into her chair, continuing to savor the warmth. She knew that Jim’s expression of dismay, despite the little resistance she had to it, was justified. If Loona didn’t know any better, she would be saying it too.

“I’m not,” was Jim’s modest response regardless of the lack of accusation; “I just feel sorry for ya, that’s all. Yanno like, fuck, when that Father Alexander called and he said what he was saying, I thought you had…” The remaining words died on the somber man’s lips before they could see the light of day, being replaced instead with the soft burning crackle of firewood. Perhaps that’s where the last words died, engulfed inside the fire pit by the miniature contained inferno.

Despite its early death, Loona knew exactly what the missing word was. She felt thankful that the forbidden single syllable wasn’t applicable to her, at least in its most literal sense; perhaps luck wasn’t entirely against her, even if it wasn’t by much. There came a rough sigh. “Sure felt like it,” Loona cared to admit, tucking up her cold bare feet up from the growingly icy grass, and onto the chair — if only she had remembered to at least throw her thigh-highs on.

“You can change back yanno, if you’re that cold,” Jim invited, noticing the disguised hound’s retreat from the cold earth; “It’s only us here.”

As tempting as it may have sounded to her, Loona simply shook her head. “I don’t have the energy yet,” she said, having curled up into a ball with her arms wrapped around her pale legs, losing herself in the simple warm orange magnificence. The ‘magnificence’ danced in its cast iron arena, performing just for them in a free private show, along with a cricket somewhere in the grass who

had stopped by to stick its nose at it. Loona's mouth fell half agape as she stared calmly into the fire, then inquired in a soft, casual way; "You like gazing into fires?"

"Yeah. 'S why I lit this tonight," Jim said as he cleared his throat; "You lose yourself in 'em sometimes, in a good way. You just stop thinking, and instead you just watch this. … I think it's nice."

"Same," Loona replied without much thought, a soft half smile appearing on her lips for just a second, before vanishing as subtle as it came. Then, from out of nowhere as some thoughts come, came an idea from Loona; "You know what would be cool? If you could touch fires without getting burnt. Like, you know, if you could stick your hand right in there, and nothing happens to you. No burns, no nothing."

"Yeah well that's a reality for you," Jim said as he looked to Loona; "You mentioned something once, about fires up here not affecting you."

"That's why I said 'you'," Loona clarified in a smart-alec form, looking up from the fire with a small sort of smirk; "…Actually that would be cool, too. If I was immune to all fires, I mean all fires. Like, say, the shit that burns me. I'd be fucking invincible."

Jim returned a smirk of his own, almost laughing at the suggestion; "Now there's a thought, not terrifying at all. An invincible dog demon. Hate to be on your bad side, shit."

A flicker of a playful scoff passed through Loona's lips; "You haven't managed it yet, I wouldn't be too worried. You're probably the only human to have survived more than a day around me, and that's saying something."

"Medal of honor," was the humorous remark that Jim offered before both human and hellhound again fell mutually silent. The hidden cricket had much to say however, chirping its little heart out with all sorts of wisdom it wished to tell its far larger listeners. But even it too retreated into silence, instead letting the warm crackling fire interject with its soothing, splintering melody. Before long Jim broke his end of the silence, patting his hand against his knee in a fidget before asking; "So, uh… You wanna come with me tomorrow? Just on a job, out on a farm. You can stay in the car if you want."

Perhaps it was a question asked too soon, especially with how novel Loona's position was. "I dunno," she meekly replied, barely shaking her head with a lack of enthusiasm. Her eyes were still

heavy with a weary pensiveness, almost grieving, all the worst fears in the world still very much a reality for her; a new reality which she would be forced to grow used to. Again Loona lost herself to the dance of the flames, almost mesmerized with the way they moved. It was akin to watching a choreographed ensemble, their dips, sways, sashays, and twirls composed in such a deliberate way as means to impress, to entertain. Despite being nothing but an amalgamation of flames with as much sentience as a dead tree, it looked so alive, brimming with personality and passionately bending, and twisting itself with purpose. Whatever that purpose was, Loona wasn't sure of, but she knew just by looking at it that it was wholly justified by some reason unknown to—

"Loona, you there?"

"Huh, what?" Loona was thrown right out of her hypnotic state, realizing then and there that she had fallen catatonic. Quickly she snapped out of it, blinking a couple of times then looked in Jim's direction. "Oh- Sorry, I was… Ugh, nevermind," Loona tried to excuse herself; "Were you saying something?"

"Yeah, just a question," Jim said almost casually, then repeated.

Loona waited in silence for a minute, staring with anticipation; "Well go on, I'm waiting," the gothic woman insisted only when no question came.

With the hellhound's attention now paid to him, Jim seemed to shift in his seat with a slight underlying discomfort, a hesitant look straightening his face. Whatever the question was, it appeared as if actually asking it was to be a challenge for one reason or another. "Well, fucken… so how didja end up here," Jim finally let out; "Like did they give you… a choice on where to be sent? Prolly shouldn't ask, 'cause yanno, it's only just… just happened."

"I appreciate the thought," Loona slurred without much emotion, almost sounding sarcastic. She explained regardless; "They didn't care where I went, as long as I was outta there. Stolas was the one who sent me up here. He didn't even seem to care where the portal led to, just summoned the last spell that was used in that dumb old book. Funnily enough, that was this place. … Soon as I got up here, I knew what I was gonna do. … Headed straight for that church, and I was gonna kill him."

"Kill who, Father Alex?"

"…Bingo."

“Loona, ya can’t do that.”

A deep, raspy sigh of frustration erupted from Loona’s throat, her teeth partially bared. “That’s all I ever hear nowadays,” Loona began; “All just “you can’t do this” and “you can’t do that”, “stop doing that”, blah blah blah. Getting real sick and tired of it, even more than I already am. Even then, why would it matter to you? The old bastard deserves it.”

“Loona, he’s not to blame for this.”

“Yeah, and who is!” Loona’s voice rang out over the soft crackling fire for the first time; “You tell me, Jim! Who allowed me to go and see him, huh? Who-who lured me in? Besides, what sorta Priest gives someone like me the time of day??” The goth tugged at her crop top, showing her campfire neighbor the pattern sewn to it; “Look at me! I’ve literally got a fucking pentagram on my shirt, clear as day! Look at it! These shorts too, a-and my hair; and… a-and the- the—… RAAGH, fucking stupid old man!” Dramatically Loona fell back into her seat and curled herself back up into a ball, having let out the boiling anger brewing away inside. Any further bottling of her emotions would’ve likely led to her exploding in a far more violent way. The hot coals that were Loona’s emotions fizzled out as suddenly as they had ignited, leaving a smoldering heap in the form of a curled-up eccentric appearing young woman, like a match burnt from tip-to-tip. “Sorry,” she found herself croaking out, her face growing dim once more; “Sorry, I just needed to… I needed to let that out. Couldn’t take it anymore.”

“Nah, I getcha,” Jim related sympathetically, and he sacrificed another cut of firewood into the fire pit — a burnt offering perhaps; “Just my advice though; you’re welcome to do that ‘round me. Yeah? But I’m warning you from now, don’t let it end up leading to something physical. Ya can’t do that, not up here.”

From her self huddling position Loona again peered over her knees; “You don’t think I know that?”

“No I know ya do,” Jim earnestly clarified, leaning from his seat towards the fire, though his sight was locked firmly on Loona through the fire. “But I’m worried about when ya don’t think straight.”

Loona reeled her head back; “Psh- what? Excuse me?? Wh-What’s that supposed to mean, when I don’t think straight?”

“Didja hear yourself just now,” the bushman asked almost incredulously; “You said to me that you wanted to kill Father Alex. Now if I was anyone else I’d call the police right here and now, and I’m sure he was very close to doing that too. I’m just saying ya can’t make threats like that, not anymore. You’re gonna have to adjust, and fast.” To Jim, Loona looked just about ready to shoot her mouth off, especially with the way her pale-skinned nose was scrunching up. He nipped it in the bud; “Right, before you go off at me, ask yourself this. Do ya wanna go to prison or not?”

Just as Loona threw her mouth wide open to bark back, she froze and let her guard down. She blinked and thought twice, her eyes twitching with much thought and clarity. “…No. N-No, I don’t,” she finally choked, practically forcing the words out which were stubborn to shift.

Jim nodded his head to this, pursing his lips and waving his hand out; “Yeah, see? This is what I mean. Ya almost barked off. Do it to me all ya like, fucken oath, but anyone else you do that to won’t tolerate it. They don’t know you like I do. You know what they’ll do, if ya go do that? They’ll chuck ya in prison; no bail, no nothing.”

As much as the hammering temptation to argue begged her to protest, Loona in her newfound clarity knew full well that Jim was right. They would throw her in prison, anyone else would — she almost met that exact fate the first time, barely three months before. Loona hummed in defeat and bowed her head slightly, at last coming to terms with what she had to do. The hellhound wasn’t clueless, she knew exactly what her responsibility was, but whether she had the mental fortitude to control herself was another thing entirely. For much of her teenage and adult life thus far, Loona had lived as a perpetually closed fist, but that fist would need to be unraveled whether she liked it or not. Change was of the essence.

Having retreated from her fire and fury, Loona sank back into seat once again; “Whatever,” she muttered, though her “indifference” sounded halfhearted. She gazed back out into nothing and tried to relax, then noticed the array of black and blue bruises peppered along her arms illuminated by the fire, finding that they had begun to shrink and fade. Progress to be sure, but the deep mental wounds still weeped. Just as she noticed her healing bruises, Loona caught Jim’s voice calling to her once again, this time without delay. Attentively she cocked her head towards him; “Yeah, what?”

“You been trying out that guitar of yours, haven’t ya,” Jim insinuated directly, lazily pointing his finger with his elbow perched upon the armrest; “Heard you this morning.”

It was at this that Loona exhaled gently, through her nose; “I never stopped,” she confessed, the corner of her lips kinking slightly upwards; “Been practicing, sorta, whenever I can. Reckon I’m getting there.”

“Ah. Right…” The young man of twenty-two years slowly nodded his head in acknowledgment, raising his eyebrows. A smirk came from his face; “Remember that song ya sang to me? That old folk song, whatever it was.” The sudden diversion of topic was Jim’s way of lightening up the mood, an attempt to shift Loona away from what ailed her, even for just a moment.

The strategy seemed to work — Loona nodded sheepishly; “Sure do,” she said quietly over the fire; “Haven’t played it since. Probably somewhere in my bag, or lost. Maybe.”

“Wild Mountain Thyme,” Jim recalled the title aloud, surprisingly having a vivid memory of it; “Nice little song, the way you handled it.”

Loona didn’t quite catch his meaning, cocking up her brow in a lack of understanding; “The way I handled it?”

“Oh no, I just mean you… Yanno, you sang it well, it was nice. I liked it,” Jim made sure to clarify as he leant back into his chair, the steel frame with its cross-sections creaking under the shifting weight.

“Oh,” the disguised hellhound realized, becoming pleasantly surprised with the quick compliment. At first Loona didn’t know what to say to it, before cutting to the chase; “Well shit, thank you. … I, uh… appreciate it.” Right after she finished speaking, Loona felt an unfamiliar feeling arise within her. It was a strange sort of feeling, almost numb but fuzzy in nature which loitered around her head, chest, and stomach. Now it wasn’t like Loona felt sick, catatonic, or anything ill-boding along those lines, in fact she remained completely lucid and in good health relative to her physical condition. But what she felt was strange, almost spacey, and a cause for her chest and stomach to feel a near alien sensation. Loona couldn’t put her finger on it for the life of her, its name.

Jim meanwhile was staring right back in silence, looking at her like she was tipsy. “You alright there,” he finally interrupted.

This was enough for Loona to snap back to reality for the umpteenth time; “Wh-gh— Huh, what?”

“Nothing, just your eyes. They went all big for a second.”

“Did they? Oh… that’s um.. that’s weird,” Loona stated waveringly, in a way which made her look and sound like she was a mile away. The strange feeling she felt quickly dissipated, and all Loona was left with afterwards was the lingering flutter inside herself. It was weird, for sure, but the hellhound couldn’t help but feel that it felt oddly captivating.

It was a strange way to reply to something as mundane as her eyes growing larger, the mildly confused look on Jim’s face saying as much. He didn’t pay much mind to it though as again he went quiet along with Loona, their chairs acting like their respective steel and fabric thrones. Deep within her own ‘throne’, Loona emptied her head of thoughts, and at long last found a resemblance of relaxation. It felt good. It felt right. Again the hellhound cracked a soft sort of smile; “Jim, hey,” she called over softly; “Go fetch something for me, would ya?”

Humored by Loona’s sudden demand, Jim replied; “Yeah righto, your majesty. Whatcha want?”

“Just my guitar, in the room,” Loona less requested and more directed; “There’s a pick right on it as well, bring that too.” It wasn’t noticeable by much, but just by the way the albeit still worse-for-wear demon was holding her voice was an encouraging sign that her physical health was on the up and up. Sir Death was losing his wicked grip, retreating back from where he came.

Encouraged by the flickers of progress Jim lifted himself up and went back inside, and ventured into ‘no man’s land’, also known as Loona’s bedroom. The first thing that hit him was the potent smoked vanilla fragrance which hung thick in the air like a sauna, without the humidity. It was small wonder as to where it came from, the fragrance at its strongest from the bedside table, where a purple-tinted carat glass contained a milky white candle, the tip of the wick blackened. From what Jim could tell Loona had quickly started a home for herself, her clothes and other assorted belongings placed methodically across the dresser, in its drawers, on the foot of her bed, and tucked inside the bedside table. The guitar and pick was one of those things leant against the bed, along with the pick wedged securely between the strings.

Retrieving the instrument at once and another thing as a surprise, Jim went back outside and met back up with Loona still curled up in front of the fire. “Got it for ya,” the tall man said after his act of generous chivalry, handing over the guitar by its neck.

“Thanks,” Loona nodded, taking the guitar; “Appreciate it, I really…” She paused right as she noticed the little brown stuffed horse held in Jim’s other hand. She looked at it with a hint of surprise; “Oh! You, um, bought him out too. Why’d you do that?”

“No reason, just thought you’d want him,” Jim said casually as he too handed over the stuffed toy.

Loona carefully plucked ‘Thorn’ out of Jim’s hands and placed him in her lap, going the extra step to make sure that he was upright as well. She raised the guitar up into her lap as well, adjusting her posture before starting to pick at the strings. The middlemost string rang to life with a twang, quavering through the air in a vibrative way that seeped across Loona’s legs. Then came the second twang, a higher note a step up the chords, instantly canceling out the note below it. Loona’s hand quickly silenced it, before strumming the pick across all six strings, each one quavering along in a choralistic single-noted intro with no apparent pre-chorus. But just as Jim sat down to listen, the guitarist paused and glared down at the guitar in a soft-eyed sort of manner.

Then, with a short sharp exhale, Loona began to play. It was a melancholy sort of tune that began with a simple intro, setting the mood for the lyrics. She sang softly with full concentration, and from the heart no less:

“I think of you a-all the time…

Now that you’re gone…

I’ve been doin’ all ki-inds of drugs…

To get you out of my mind…

‘Cause I noticed you don’t like me no more…

And it bre-eaks my heart…”

“So now I’ll just dri-ift away… and disappear for a while…”

Saturday, the next day, had arrived — Exile plus two days.

Black treaded rubber met with rich damp dirt as the silver modified Holden WB swayed into “5 Stanmore Road,” home to the only wheat farm that side of the Darling Downs. Freshly plowed fields pinched either side of the long straight dirt road that the vehicle rumbled down, the driver shifting down the gears to a slower cruising speed as dirt clacked lightly against the underside. Visible in the distance where the road ended was an old raised farmhouse. It was painted egg-white with a carmine tin roof to match, the old utility truck parked on the side where a far newer tin shed was built acting as a clear sign that someone was home.

Brittle specks of barely drizzling rain fell onto the windscreen from the patchy sky above, the driver flicking on the wipers to get rid of the accumulated wet obstruction. “We’re just about here,” Jim said to his passenger; “You alright in here by yourself?”

In the passenger seat was Loona who was gazing out the window, the bandage around her cranium having been replaced with a far simpler square white wound dressing, as progress allowed. “Yeah yeah, I’ll be fine,” Loona calmly assured with only half attention, too busy looking overhead at the abundance of light gray clouds. She peered over at him with a slight turn of her head; “You sure you don’t need help?”

In his element, or at least in his profession, Jim had full confidence; “Nah nah, I’ve done this job alone far longer than I’ve done it with anyone,” he told her frankly. “You just worry about getting better, yeah?”

Loona shrugged and said a quiet “aight” before peeking out through her window again.

With the beaten path getting progressively rougher as the farmhouse drew ever closer, the modern classic utility truck slowed to a suitable gingerly pace, crawling to a stop just in front of the house. After one final check-up to make sure Loona was okay, the gun-for-hire with rifle in tow stepped out, throwing on the oilskin coat he had bought for the deteriorating weather; it would only get worse from here. Out from the tin-roofed veranda also stepped down a short older man, hobbling down the steps and onto the wet gravel-dirt slurry that was his yard. The pale blue buttoned shirt he wore stood in stark contrast to Jim’s own checkered green one, as well as the thick abundance of dull silver hair which made up his gigantic beard and long mane. Setting him apart from most was the absence of his lower right arm, the sleeve folded into a knot just where his elbow would’ve been once upon a time.

Soon as the old thick-bearded farmer’s brown leather shoes made contact with the damp ground, he pointed to Jim with an affirmative finger. “I’m telling ya from now, that rifle of yours isn’t gonna graze more than a hair,” the assumed-to-be ‘Trevor Pike’ said in full confidence.

“Yeah? What makes you say that,” Jim asked with full justification, propping up the reliable old Lee Enfield over his shoulder.

‘Trevor’ shook his head and pointed out into the empty fields of dark brown; “‘Cause I’ve seen the size of it, mate. It’s huge! Probably the largest, meanest looking bastard I’ve ever seen, nothing like him!”

“Yeah, righto,” the recent arrival said ponderously, scanning the surrounding horizon as far as the property went. “So how many we talking?”

“Just one big one,” the latest customer to Jim’s services explained, his tone serious and absent of hesitation.

Jim’s face contorted in puzzled disbelief, once more looking out into the distance; “One? For five hundred bucks, just one pig.” He turned to look back at ‘Trevor Pike’, seeing if he had misspoke; “That’s a big sum to pay for just one, innit?”

“Mate I wouldn’t be paying five hundred if I didn’t think it was worth it,” again the old farmer affirmed. He looked dead serious, his initial words obviously not a mistake. “I’m telling ya, whatever that fucken thing is, it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before. If you can kill it, I’m happy to pay five hundred in cash. But fair dinkum you’re not putting a dint in it with that thing! Ya need me shotgun, I’ve got her in the house.”

“If that’s whatcha think, then sure. Lead the way,” Jim capitulated, slinging his own rifle over his shoulder.

This ‘Trevor’ had all intention to do so, but just before he turned around to lead, his eyes drifted back towards the silver Holden WB. “She your apprentice,” he asked promptly, gesturing his remaining hand towards the car.

Jim knew exactly what he meant; “Nah, just a friend,” he informed, glancing back towards Loona still in the passenger seat; “Bought her along, she’s been through some shit.”

“Mm… Yeah, right. Sure looks like it,” the farmer commented in concern for her physical state, then without another look turned around and led the exterminator up into his rustic home.

“So what is this thing,” Jim pressed as he trudged up the flight of stairs onto the veranda, taking one last glance at Loona before following along completely; “Ya sure it’s just a pig?”

“Mate I don’t know what it is,” the aging Mister Pike shook his head as he pushed the front door open; “Wandered onto the farm about two days ago, made himself at home. Can’t even leave my house anymore ‘cause I don’t know whether he’s gonna come outta nowhere or not. Surprised he didn’t come out with you coming up the driveway.” The homeowner came to a stop in front of his bedroom door and instructed Jim to wait there before going inside, leaving the door ajar to allow the talk to continue. *“Been watching him since he arrived,”* Trevor Pike rambled on, the sound of a lock being undone coming from beyond the door; *“He’s a strange looking bastard, not like any pig I know!”*

All of this information and the bizarrely high price for one ‘mere’ pig had piqued Jim’s interest higher, prompting him to ask thereafter; “What’s he look like?”

“Nah see if I told ya, you won’t believe me,” the old but witty Mister Pike expressed his doubts, followed by the sound of light metal shifting. Perhaps the sound of a firearm being lifted from its place in the gun safe, but that the man standing outside beyond it didn’t know, unless he peered inside.

A dry humored grin spread across Jim’s face and he shook his head to himself; “I’ve seen some weird shit out there, mate,” the rifleman said, leaning his arm up against the brown-painted wall; “I’m pretty sure I’ll believe ya.”

The sudden pause in talk from the farmer indicated quite loudly that he was contemplating the idea of spilling the proverbial beans. It was with or after the sound of a metallic click like the unlock of a chamber did he finally reveal more; *“That thing out there’s got eyes.”*

“Yeah, pigs tend to have those,” was the bland reply that Jim gave, almost dry in humor.

“Not all over their bodies, they don’t!”

Needless to say this struck the exterminator as odd, almost unbelievable. In fact, no, it was unbelievable. Despite having been through literal hell and back, the story now more advanced in detail seemed almost a little too tall. However, not wanting to go back on his word for the sake of a good contract, Jim entertained the wheat grower’s claim. “Well shit, if it’s like that, it could have a birth defect. Deformed even, probably a bad breed or something or rather.”

“Yeah, probably,” the one-handed Mister Pike conceded, at last the door being pulled open to reveal him coming right through, double-barreled shotgun in hand. “All I know is that I want it

bagged. Here, take this." The black-steeled firearm was pushed into Jim's hands, who grabbed it, getting used to its complete weight — stock, barrel, and all. The owner pointed to it; "You've already got two slugs loaded in there, right? There's an extra six in the reserve on the comb there. Ya might need it, I dunno." He ushered Jim back outside onto the veranda and faced leftwards, pointing out towards the furthest point of the farmland. "Saw him last this morning, heading over there. See those trees? The riverbank's just there, reckon that's where he's gone to nod off. Just drive along the track leading there, I'm sure you'll see him." Just as Jim obliged and began heading down the steps back towards the car, Trevor called out; "Bring him back once he's head, I wanna see him!"

The shotgun loaned to Jim felt laborious over his shoulder, so it felt liberating when he propped it behind the seats of Ute, then threw himself into the driver's seat. "Gonna have to drive a little bit more," Jim told Loona, still in the passenger's seat. "Just down to the river there, I'm told the money's there. Front row seat for ya."

"Oh joy, more driving," Loona muttered almost sarcastically, bringing herself to sit upright. "A-Again, you sure you don't need my help?"

"You don't have to ask that if you wanna join in," Jim said knowingly, having just figured out the purpose of said question; "You can if you want."

Loona shrugged her shoulders, her arms folded; "But what's there to join in on? This is hardly any work, plus I'm not getting paid for it."

"But you just said you wanted to help," Jim pointed out as the engine roared to life, navigating the car out onto another beaten dirt track diverting off from the farmhouse.

"I just want something to do," Loona stated, her face looking downtrodden and demoralized. A sharp huff escaped her mouth; "Like I don't wanna be sitting here like useless luggage. It's making me feel more gross than I already do."

"No no, I know how you feel," a sympathetic Jim made sure to assert; "But that's why we need a job for you, get you back up on your feet. There's not much a choice for you in that department, so —"

"Oh Satan fucking dammit, how many times do I have to say it," Loona snapped suddenly, making her position clear; "I'm not babysitting kids, Jim."

“Are you saying that because you can’t, or you don’t want to?”

Loona parted her lips into a sneer; “Tsh! Does it matter??” There came a very sudden, uneasy silence in the Holden WB as it rumbled slowly down the path, heading with even unhindered pace towards the foretold riverbank. Loona’s fresh sneer faded as she side-eyed the driver, quickly noticing the unexpected tension in the air. Jim didn’t return the glance as his eyes were already preoccupied, but the blank look on his face told Loona all that she needed to know. She figured that perhaps she had answered a little too liberally with her protest. She corrected herself; “I’ll think about it,” the gothic passenger reluctantly promised.

“You probably should,” Jim answered calmly, turning the steering wheel a little as the pathway widened into a wide patch of dirt, like a makeshift damp earth cul-de-sac. Beyond where the road ended was the barbed wire fence which guarded the entire perimeter of the property, and directly in front of the Ute’s bonnet, a few short feet away, was the steep riverbank cutting into the land. A few scattered trees stood guard on either side of the bank, some of them arching tall and mighty over the running water below.

Jim lumbered his frame out of the car and armed himself, the double-barreled shotgun sturdy in his grip, and he donned his hat; a fairly new gray cattleman. The rain which thus far had only been drizzling seemed to pick up with how hard it fell, though each droplet was still few and far between, making it bearable. But weather is a fickle thing, that Jim knew, and so aimed to get the job over and done with. With shotgun in hand the hunter strolled up to the fence and began to look for signs of a break-in, an irregularity in the structure that signified someone or something had broken through. When the distant brittle rumble of thunder slipped overhead, that’s when Jim spotted it — barely a foot away in one section, the fence post had been toppled over, sunken into the ground. Earth had been kicked up from the disturbance, a gaping hole left where the post would’ve stood. This was a start, but there was no sign of tracks.

Left with no other clue, Jim ventured further, trodding over the collapsed section and onto the ledge where the riverbank began. He looked down the bank and at the shoulders, scanning them carefully in case this fabled ‘multiple-eyed pig’ had blended itself in the habitat it invaded. Jim’s search was fruitless. There was nothing in sight. Another stir of thunder came from the distance as Jim turned back around, trying to think of another way to search as he marched back to the car. There he linked back up with Loona who was still in the car, opening the car door and leaning inside.

The passenger turned her head towards him; “Any luck out there,” Loona asked curiously.

“Nup, nothing,” Jim shook his head, looking back to the river ledge through the windscreen dotted with raindrops. He squinted and thought aloud; “If he’s hiding out there, he’s doing a bang-on job.”

“Huh… Doesn’t wanna be found,” Loona commented casually, sniffing and rubbing her nose as she had a look for herself. Her vantage point, or lack thereof due to the obvious blind spot, was of no use. There was no pig to be seen. Just then, Loona had an idea; “Want me to sniff him out?”

“Sniff him— Oh right, hellhound,” Jim realized, nodding along as it made immediate sense; “Yeah sure, if ya could. Wanna get this over and done with, in case this rain picks up.”

At last, as she had wished, Loona had something to do; “On it,” she said with newfound motivation as she got out of the car. She had barely been out of her seat for more than a few seconds and already she was sniffing the air, trying to catch the scent of something, anything to gain that seed capital in the end. From what the gothic woman could smell so far, it was definitely going to start raining properly soon, but underneath that Loona could smell… something else. It smelt familiar. “Over there,” Loona said and pointed, back down the river. Though he had already taken a look at the spot Loona was pointing to, Jim trusted the hellhound’s directional strength and made his way back towards it.

Loona followed in tandem, continuing to sniff the air, still catching that very familiar scent. She had smelt it before on one occasion; a musky, dirty, almost smoky aroma which almost made her gag the first time she came in contact with it. Sniffing all the way down the bank, suddenly the smell disappeared, leaving herself and her companion-in-hunting “blind” to where the source could be. “Motherfucker, where is he…” Loona growled to herself in a mumble, scanning both her side of the river and the opposite with a hawk’s eye.

“It’s like ya said, he doesn’t wanna be found,” Jim felt inclined to agree, searching the area more thoroughly than before with little event. “Do you think he’s up and left?”

Loona just shook her head, spinning back around; “No, I don’t think so. If he did, I wouldn’t have smelled anything. He’s around here for sure… but where?” Before completely throwing in the towel, Loona gave one last resort sniff… the scent had returned, and at its strongest at that. “Woah-woah, wait. Hang on…” the unshakable tracker whispered harshly, then sniffed again to pinpoint its exact location. … ***Behind her.***

Behind Loona stood a gigantic specimen of a ‘pig’. No, a beast; a hulking, broad, humongous example of a hog-appearing beast, its skin a blotchy combination of grays, silvers, and black. Spear sharp jet-black horns jutted out from the corners of its maw and out its forehead, and stalagmite-

esque spikes protruded crudely from its humped back like daggers. The amount of unsettling eyes it had, dotted across its body, would send any brave man into paralytic shock, and the eyes upon its head blared like a bull's; seething with pure animalistic rage. There Loona stood in abstract fear, staring wide-eyed into the beast's face, trying her hardest not to make any sudden mov—

SSCREEEEEEEEE—

****BAM!!!****

Chunks of brain matter and bone spewed out the back of the beast's head, and it crumpled with a heavy *"THUNK!!"* into the sodden river bank. The beast was dead in a flash, in this case the flash of a shotgun, its shrapnel casing turning its head into a fine, chunky, goulash-like paste.

"GAH— FUCK! Fuh—FUCK!! HOLY FUCK!!" Loona screamed, gasping for breath as she staggered back from the gigantic corpse, retreating back towards Jim; "Hoh-Holy fucking shit, what the actual fuck!! He-He was there the whole time?!"

Jim was just as shocked by the grotesque beast's sudden appearance; "Apparently! You okay??"

"Ye-Yeah, I am," Loona exclaimed as she steadied her breath, gawking back over at the piggish corpse; "…Woah, hold on a sec… That's a…" the gothic woman approached it cautiously, squinting hard at it before coming to a realization. Her mouth fell agape; "Wait, that's a fucking Hell Hog!"

The rifleman seemed bewildered, even more so by what Loona had revealed; "A what??"

"A hell hog! It's a— it's a goddamn, motherfucking hell hog! From-From Wrath, it has to be! It is!" This sheer bewildering fact alone baffled Loona, overpowering the adrenaline rush from having almost been attacked by an example of Wrath's native livestock. *"How the hell did it get up here..?"* The question rang out inside her head, translating into words which tumbled out her mouth; much like the slurried mess of brains which tumbled out the gaping hole in the ex-hell hog's head.

Despite it being very clearly dead, Jim approached the corpse cautiously, the barrels never leaving the sight of its demolished forehead. Tar black blood streamed down across its face like a widow's

veil, the flow quickly dissipating into a trickle as it soaked deep into the riverbank. “Right, so how do we move this thing,” Jim brought up the inevitable question, already drumming up a few solutions in his head, mostly involving pulling and pushing.

“I don’t think we can,” Loona expressed her doubt, approaching the corpse and giving it a nudge with her shoe. “These fuckers are dense as hell. You’re lucky to move it an inch on your own! … But again, a hell hog? H-How did it—… D-Did it wander through a portal, or what, how is it up here??”

“Err, no clue,” Jim murmured and shook his head slowly, trying to figure the answer for himself. “…Right, anyhow. However it did, it’s up here now and it’s dead, that’s it. I think… I’ll take a photo of it. Show the old bloke back at the house as proof it’s bagged, get our cash. I’ll split it between us, two-fifty.”

It was at this that Loona spun around and shot Jim a mildly surprised face, almost taken aback by the proposal. “Split it?” Loona blinked; “No, dude, c’mon. I didn’t do anything here, I just—”

“You’re gonna need the money Loona, it’s fine by me,” the young man assured and smiled widely, almost smirking; “You sniffed him out, didn’t you?”

Loona half-chuckled, gesturing sharply to the hog’s corpse; “Hah- Yeah, and I almost got bodied by him!”

The lingering question of how the hog made its way up into the human realm seemed to vanish into the back of the hellhound’s mind, even after Jim caught a clear picture of it and started heading back up to the car. Loona followed suit, making it all the way up before looking back down, the rotund cadaver obviously not going anywhere anytime soon. No more attention needed to be paid to the dead wild beast, that Loona knew as she hopped back into the passenger seat, then riding off back towards the farmhouse. Payday had arrived.

“So how’re you feeling now?” — This was the question put to Loona half an hour after leaving the farm on Stanmore Road, the silver Holden WB cruising down the rustic road with ease, even as the rain became heavier. Jim’s earlier prediction of even wetter weather had come true, the mere droplets having multiplied into an utter downpour, the windscreen wipers working full time to keep the view of the road unobstructed.

“A little better,” Loona replied after cautious reflection, looking out at the falling deluge which coated the earth in water. “I’m not getting any worse, so. Take that as you will.”

“It’s better than getting worse,” Jim remarked in response; “Yeah, that’s… that’s good, it’s progress. You’re on the mend.” The additional words seemed to wander, more than what was needed to the young woman’s comparatively meager response.

This wasn’t lost on her who shot a side-eye to the driver, immediately picking up on it. She figured the intention out in a near instant. “Dude, I know what you want to ask me,” Loona stated knowingly; “The thing with the kid.”

Jim folded like a house of cards; “Yeah, yeah,” he admitted almost immediately; “I’m just askin’ so we can get you back up on your feet, with a job and everything. Not wanting to pressure ya! But again, I’m just worried about opportunities for you.”

“Jim, I’m not great with kids,” Loona stated clearly, having repeated a similar point time and time again; “I know it, and you know it. I just don’t like them! They’re annoying, shitty, bratty if they don’t get their own way, they cry a lot. Everyone knows that kids are hard work!”

“And killing things isn’t?”

“Hey, that’s a whole different thing entirely!”

“No see I get that, but…” Jim paused in his wording and reconsidered his angle of attack. It was like trying to shift an immovable object, with just how stubborn Loona was in her conviction, rightly or wrongly. “Alright, think of it this way. Say you suddenly have to look after a kid, right?”

Loona squirmed in her seat; “Nightmare scenario, but sure, go on.”

“And say you had to look after him. As in *had* to, no other choice. Would ya do it, yes or no? Surely you wouldn’t let a kid starve to death.” The look that Loona gave Jim looked deliberately callous and indifferent to the hypothetical, almost stubbornly so. “Loona, you know you wouldn’t, come on,” the young man said, confident in his belief.

And with that Loona put her foot down, throwing her head back against the headrest; “Ugh! Look, Jim! Just listen for a second, okay? I said I’ll think about it! Goddammit, quit forcing me to come to a conclusion and give me some time to think about it. Hell, it hasn’t even been an hour! Just let me think over it, please? Can you let me do that, or is that too much to ask??”

“Nono, that’s fair!” Jim quickly corrected himself, trying to deescalate. It was his passenger’s outburst that made him realize he was pushing a little too forcefully; “Sorry. … Look, I was just trying to—”

“It’s fine,” Loona huffed, the frustration having been expelled from her body in a near instant; “Just… just let me think. I need to think.” And so, with the rain pelting the windscreen relentlessly, the hellhound, with much to think about, did. Was there really any other option?

The rain tumbled down, clattering off the cruising pickup like pebbles.

An invitation was gripped loosely in Stolas’ hands as he read it, analyzing every single word printed with a cold, disdainful glare. Due to the goetia prince’s high stature in Hell’s society, it was part and parcel to be invited to a wide array of gatherings from a multitude of people, none of them particularly being of his liking. This one was no different; an invitation to the ceremony of the ‘Shoktrup’s’ annual “March of The Thousands” hosted around the inner-city Pride Ring, signed personally by none other than one ***"Hermann O. Ritter."*** Stolas cursed the name, looking up and out beyond his palace’s grand balcony, an evening breeze brushing across his feathered face.

More so than he cursed the ‘Kommandant’s’ name, at this hour Stolas cursed his own. He had betrayed the only person he had ever truly loved in his life. A crude and cruel knife he had embedded into the heart of that imp, severing the trust they had developed together; that was, the trust at least in Stolas’ own love-deprived mind. Despite knowing each other for months, perhaps years from a certain point of view, the goetia prince never knew what Blitz truly thought of him. Was their love ever more than transactional sex, or was it something else? Something… more? Stolas wasn’t sure. He never was on many things, and in tandem many people were never so sure of him. Was he truly the successor to Paimon, or another redundant child, made illegitimate through his lackluster performance in the Aristocracy? To Stolas, who was always the prime subject of scrutiny, controversy, rumors, and numerous assassination attempts, it was all so tiresome.

The owl prince's eyes grew heavy with the burden of mental and physical exhaustion. He had spent the day at yet another semi-frequent gathering of the goetia Aristocracy, the small scale pop-up event having drained him of all energy by the end of it. Truly, it had depressed him even more than he already was. "Damn it all…" Stolas whimpered to himself, staring off into the jagged horizon that was Imp City. Somewhere within that depressing concrete jungle, there stood IMP headquarters high and mighty. It stood there staunchly, reminding Stolas of the betrayal he had inflicted upon that lowly CEO. The prince's breath was shaky; "Damn it…" he whispered again.

"Yes. … Damn it indeed."

Stolas jumped in fright and spun around from the railing, letting out a gasp! He was just about ready to jump for his life to escape, but it was only…

…Blitz.

There he was, in the flesh. A vacant, eerie, glassy-eyed look was fixated to his face. The imp didn't blink, like there was no need to. His eyes, as wide as they were, looked silently maniac, broad and vast like an owl's. Blitz's mouth showed no expression, and neither did the rest of his face, as if it was all a painted veneer — a frightening illusion. But this was no illusion; Blitz was really here.

Stolas' clenched hand tugged at his red vest; "Buh… B-Buh, B-Bl… Uh…" the goetia prince gasped, his shallow breath preventing him from speaking.

Blitz nodded his head, slowly. "Yeah. It's me, Stolas," the imp said flatly, his voice absent of emotion; "It's just little old me. Hello." The intruder waved his hand in a slow circular fashion, almost mocking, before his huge yellow eyes twitched towards the horizon. "Nice view you got here," Blitz coldly remarked; "Best seat in the house. … Nope. Can't beat a view like that. Can ya?"

"B-Blitz, please," Stolas gagged through his shallow, nervous breath. He knew exactly what Blitz was there for; "I-I didn't have a… w-w-we didn't… we didn't have a… a…" The aristocrat paused when he noticed the grimoire tucked under the imp's arm. "Wh-… Why is… Blitz, why is that here?"

The deliberately slow and smooth shrug that Blitz gave off sent a shiver up Stolas' spine. The chill only got worse when a cold, crooked smirk seeped across the length of his face; "I don't need it anymore," Blitz said in a low gurgle. "IMP is dead."

“Wh-… What? What do you me—”

“I dissolved it,” Blitz interrupted without urgency, his pitch unchanging from the deadness it rang; “Just today. Actually I just came from the bank, coupla hours ago. I dissolved the *whooole* company; assets, rights, branding, everything. *Ev-Ery-Thing.* Not sure who bought what’s left, but Frankly? I don’t give a blue-balled fuck. They can have it. … There’s nothing left for me there.”

“B-But—… But how are… Blitz, how are you going to—” — ***Clik!*** — Stolas yelped in terror when Blitz quick-drew his pistol from his coat, aiming it square between his eyes! “GAH! No-No, Blitz, please!!”

“AS IF YOU GIVE A FUCK!!” Blitz’s voice exploded into an intense, all-engulfing rage; “You don’t care how I’m going to survive, you lying, deceiving bastard! You took MY DAUGHTER away from me!! I should fucking drop you dead right here, right now, and I should make YOUR daughter watch, as I burn your crumpled corpse right out there in the courtyard!! I should take — EVERYTHING — away from you! EVERYTHING!!”

“Please, no! No!! Blitz, please no!!” Torrents of petrified tears streamed down Stolas’ face as he cowered against the railing in fright. He looked pathetic, cowering from a mere imp, his life just a few inches short of being stripped from his body.

A wide, disgusting smile split Blitz’s face in half, stretching from ear to ear, and from it came an equally as horrendous chuckle; “Tch-heheh… You really think I would stoop that low, huh? Holy fuck you ARE pathetic. You’re not even worth the bullet. Turns out everyone’s right about you — you’re a fucking pussy.” Blitz marched in quick-time right up into Stolas’ face, pushing the cold barrel straight in between the prince’s eyes, causing him to yelp and wail even more. Using the grimoire’s spine as a means to lift up Stolas’ quivering chin, Blitz growled at him in a more tempered tone; “Here’s what’s gonna happen; I’m gonna give you back the grimoire. You’re gonna take it. I’m gonna leave here tonight, and vanish like a fart in the wind… And you’re going to forget about me. We’re DONE. Do I make myself clear, or do I need to use your brains as an eccentric art piece?”

Through gross sobs, heaves, and hiccups, Stolas nodded an exacerbated, desperate nod.

“Good. And now? I’m gonna find my daughter. None of you sick fucks will stop me.” Blitz forcefully slapped his pistol right across Stolas’ face with a meaty ***THWACK!!***, sending the

goetia down to the floor in a pathetic sobbing heap. He left the prince with his grimoire before jumping off the balcony, landing a good few feet down in the bushes before running off into the advancing night. The search began.

Stolas, with his fists clenched and in the fetal position, sobbed profusely.

Hell hath no fury like a father betrayed.

Square One (Pt. III)

When Millie finished reading the redundancy letter posted through underneath the apartment's door, her knees buckled and she slid to the floor. It was over; IMP was dead, along with her livelihood. "No… Fuck, n-no," the usually stoic imp quavered, the shock almost overwhelming her entirely.

Sallie May was already packing her sister's belongings. She was angry. "Ragh! Absolute motherfuckers," the little sister of the two growled like a wildcat; "I knew it would come to this, sis, I just knew it! Pair of shitty little hotheads couldn't stop their mouths a-runnin', and now we're ALL unemployed!"

But Millie wasn't listening, not by much at least. She was too busy mulling dreadfully over the words, her vision in a cloudy haze of disbelief and distress. "H-How could he-… Fuck, how could he do this to us? After so long…"

"Some people are just like that, Mills," Sallie May tried to console from her side of the living room, stuffing one of Millie's shirts into the suitcase; "Ya try to make sense of it, you'll just end up drivin' yourself nuts."

"It's not fair…" Was Millie's meek reply, as tears began to roll down her cheeks and onto Blitz's signature at the bottom; "It's not fair, Sal', it's not FUCKING FAIR!!" The Wrath imp ripped and scrunched up the letter, then hurled the projectile across the room which hit her wedding photograph. "Th-This wasn't supposed to happen! Life was supposed to be good, Sal'! I was gonna start a family, and be happy, and-and—"

"Millie!" Sallie May cried and rushed over to her sister, embracing her in a tight hug. "It's okay," the younger sister consoled in a much softer tone; "We'll get through this. Together."

Millie vigorously shook her head; "No, no, it's not okay. It's not okay, Sallie! Thi-This was supposed to be our life, Sal'! This was supposed to be our home! My life is over, our marriage is gonna fall apart!"

"No, don't say that! You don't know that for sure," the fellow Wrath kin tried to assure; "Don't think about things that won't happen. I might be crass towards him, but I know he's a good man, Mills. He loves you."

Her heart ached immensely, but even through this near unbearable agony, Millie knew with all of her heart that her sister was right. Moxxie was an unshakable rock when it came to their marriage, even through the multitude of hardships they had been through together; his short-tempered streak from the past few months didn't compromise this love either. A crumb of reassurance dampened Millie's woes, though one thought still stuck; "B-But where are we going to live? We're homeless without the money and rent's due today, they'll evict us!"

"That's why you're comin' to live with us," Sallie May stated; "'S why we're packin', leaving this dump behind. Don't worry, I'll make sure Ma and Pa go easy on him."

"Sure as hell hope they do," Millie croaked, sniffling as she wiped her tears away. She looked towards the front door from the couch, furrowing her brow with concern; "Where is he? He-He said he'd be back shortly, it's been two hours."

"Mills, I'm sure he's fine," Sallie May almost abruptly assured, grunting as she finally shut up one of two of Millie's brown suitcases, the last one to be packed. "I shot him a text earlier," the younger sister added with both luggage in each hand; "He knows we're heading back to wrath. I packed his stuff a little bit, he just needs to finish it off." Sallie May was just about to make a beeline for the front door, a gateway for a "new" life for Millie back at the farm; "C'mon, let's go," she nudged her older sister's shoulder, handing over one of the two suitcases; "Pa's waiting for us back at wrath."

The reality was that Millie was only half listening, her full attention instead paid to the now bare room; almost every photograph, decoration, and everything else had been stripped from the living room, except for the couch and television which was property of the apartment itself. A single tear pricked up in Millie's eye and she wiped it away, glumly following behind her sister who was waiting patiently outside.

Neither of them spoke a word as they left the dingy old apartment building one last time, making headway to the bus stop. From the twenty-minute bus ride, the pair of sisters would head for the train station, catching the '10:21' back to Wrath where their father promised to be waiting. There would be no jubilation upon their return, only a swift transition into a recovery period, helping Millie back up into her feet as soon as possible.

The bus arrived three minutes later than expected, pulling up with a sluggish and lumbering halt before the doors shifted open. Sallie May paid for Millie's fare, who brushed past the driver and into a seat in the middle of the bus, around the center-leftmost seat by the window. In no time at all the bus got to moving again, and Sallie May lumbered over to her sister with suitcase in hand,

plopping herself down right next to her kin. Again they didn't exchange words, neither of them had the energy to. Instead they sat in pensive, glum silence, the bus swaying as it cruised along Pride's urban streets, occasionally stopping and taking on more passengers as it went. Some got off, some got on; such was the flow of public transport.

One stop, however, stood out. As the bus slowed to a cumbersome stop once again, a small group of prominent figures coasted into view. They were tall, definitely taller than imps, perhaps around a hellhound's height; their black and white-lined uniforms consisting of a peaked cap, tunic, jodhpurs, and boots polished to a fine lacquer-like shine, only adding to their tall, imposing appearances. These were sinners no doubt, but not just any ordinary sinners, no; it was unmistakable as to who they were, their affiliation clearly marked on their caps and forearms in the form of two jagged lines.

Soon as the bus stopped and the doors swung open for its newest passengers, the hellhound bus driver called back in his gruff, deep voice. "These men have booked those seats, ladies," he announced, directly addressing Millie and Sallie May; "Gonna have to ask ya both to move."

Sallie May blinked; "Move?? What are you talking about, this is a public bus! There's no—"

"Dammit, lady! I said—…" The driver petered off as the looming figures stepped on, the apparent leader of the group flashing an identification card of sorts to the driver himself. The hellhound nodded almost compliantly to them, waving them through with a light tremble in his rough old hand.

Both Millie and Sallie May took a good look at the small group of high-profile sinners moving uniformly in a line, one behind the other. The leader of said group was right in front of them; a shorter sort of figure with a pitch black buttoned overcoat, with a silver waist belt stretching down past his forelegs, the lower collar dyed a fine silvery white. His peaked visor cap was of the same oppressive black pigment, the only white on the headpiece being the cockade, cords, and piping atop the tall crown. His face was completely obscured; not by the inky-black void which made up his comrades' facial features or lack thereof, but instead by a full bandage wrapping of his entire head, and a pair of round glasses which guarded his narrow bloodshot eyes. He was staring right at the two imps.

Sure enough the miniature entourage stopped where both sisters sat, the bandage-faced leader staring them down with a cold indifference. If he did have any true feelings towards them, whether disdainful or otherwise, he didn't show it, and neither did his brood. The lead sinner cleared his throat, raising his black-gloved hand in front of his obstructed mouth, and said in an accented mild voice; "I'm afraid he's correct, ladies. We'll have to get you to move."

Sallie May scoffed loudly in defiance; “Pff— what?? No-no, old man, I reckon you’re mistaken. See, there was no ‘reserved’ sign on these here seats or nothin’! There’s all these other seats to—”

“I’m not asking, woman, I am telling,” the high-ranked sinner coldly interrupted and flashed his identification in front of Sallie May’s face, as if it was the key on getting the imps to clear off. The card was pristine and decorated with a “United Realms of Hades” seal marked in red, covering the entire background of the card’s printing. A name, date of birth, rank, and “headquarters address” was printed in fine white ink, contrasting to the black and red background which jutted out to the eyes.

Sallie May couldn’t care less about the Sinner’s pomposity, swiping the card away from her face; “Get that thing outta my face, asshole! I couldn’t care less about what where ya come from or who in hell you are, we’re not moving from this—”

“Sallie,” Millie placed her hand on her sister’s shoulder, a pleading look in her eyes; “Let’s not do this. Let’s move.”

“But Millie, they’re…” Try as Sallie May might to argue and stand her ground, the weary look in her sister’s eyes swayed her otherwise. If it weren’t for this look, there would’ve been a physical fight right that second. With great reluctance Sallie May shuffled out of her seat, Millie following behind as the bus got to moving again.

In truth Sallie May was shaken by the encounter, her courage only maintained by the desire to protect her sister. As the sisters sat down on a seat further forwards, the younger wrath imp glared angrily at the back of the sharply-dressed sinner’s head. His name was burnt firmly into her memory — ***“Heinrich.”***

Rain continued to thrash the earth below as the Holden WB crept into the garage, coming to a halt a mere foot short of the back wall before the engine cut off. Water dripped from the Ute’s sodden frame onto the dull concrete, even down the doors when they swung open. Jim’s boots made contact with the floor and he stepped out, Loona’s black and white sneakers following suit from the other side. “That’s not letting up,” the young man exclaimed, referring to the relentless downpour outside.

With the rain came the sudden drop in temperature, and nobody felt it more than Loona who shivered, rubbing her forearms to keep herself warm. “Ugh! Just our fucking luck,” the pale woman groaned, wincing at the deluge beyond the hinged doors. “Sh-Should we run for it, get to the house? The front’s right there, we’ll make it!”

But Jim had just doubts. “Nah, it’s too heavy,” he said, flicking his hand out into the rain, only for it to become soaked in an instant. Jim dried his hand on the thigh of his trousers; “We’ll wait in here a couple minutes, wait for it to calm down.”

A souring look stained Loona’s face; “And how long’s that gonna take,” she growled in her signature “starting to get shitty right about now” tone.

The coat-clad country yokel was no authority on weather forecasts, made apparent by his shrug; “Argh… I dunno, fifteen minutes,” Jim threw out the rough estimate. This was followed by Loona letting out a gruff sigh. “Hey, you’re welcome to try and run to the house! Just don’t expect to be too dry.”

“No, no! You know what? Don’t worry about it,” Loona huffed as she pulled down the tailgate, then used it as a seat; “I’m fine with this! Didn’t feel like going inside anyway, I love being cold! Motherfucking rain, piece of shit…” Just as she had gotten settled in for the wait, hunched over while hugging herself against the chill, she was caught off guard when a khaki woolen blanket was thrown over her head; “Wh— Hey! What the fuck?!”

“You said you were cold,” Jim exclaimed as he sat beside a surprised looking Loona; “That’ll do ya! It’s wool!”

Loona scowled while she adjusted the blanket, wrapping it around herself; “You didn’t need to throw it on me, you dick! Like okay thanks, I appreciate it, but goddamn!” She shook her head and hunched away from Jim, quickly getting used to the warmth the shabby old blanket provided for her. “…But yeah, thanks anyway,” Loona repeated again, this time her tone was far more soft-tempered.

“Nah, no worries,” the bushman replied as he looked out into the rainstorm, almost marveling at how much it downpoured. He had seen heavy rain like this before, but every time the force of it impressed him. This one felt a little different; not strange or unsettling, but rather more pleasantly mesmerizing, especially with the light bluish-gray haze from the rain sweeping with the wind. It was a great watch, in its own naturally majestic style.

In her own appreciation for the spectacle, Loona found it oddly beautiful too. The way the rain danced with each twist of the wind rivaled only the fire she had watched the night before, gloating liberally about its magnificence — and what a right it had. Suddenly she was reminded of something; “Hm... You know what’s funny? There was a storm exactly like this on the day Blitz adopted me. I remember watching it on the couch, through the window behind the TV. Honestly it was beautiful, being able to watch something like that through an actual window, instead of a set of bars. … For the first time in my life, I felt free.”

“Can imagine,” was Jim’s solemn reply, shifting himself in his makeshift tailgate seat. He had heard snippets of Loona’s experiences through the so-called “adoption center”, none of it good. “You got your own room, too. What about the old man, what was he doing?”

At that a small, sentimental smile appeared. “He was cooking,” Loona half-whispered; “It was some sort of slop, can’t remember what it was called. Kinda like soup, now that I think about it, but chunky. But fuuuck, did it taste good. Hah… I’ll tell you this because I know you won’t mock me; I literally almost cried when I ate it.”

The smile was contagious, prompting Jim to produce one to call his own; “No shit?”

“Pfft, no I’m not kidding! But then again, anything more than lukewarm crap in a tin is gonna taste way better.” After this driest of dry-humored remarks, Loona cleared her throat and continued; “But it’s like… for the first time in so fucking long, I felt like I was alive! It was like I just broke out of jail, and I was free, just free from it all! The smell, the food, the abuse, everything! Ugh… What I’d give to feel that way again.” She paused a second to look out into the storm, then said in somber reflection; “This is gonna sound weird, but it’s almost like Blitz, um… it’s like he gave me life? Or like ‘a’ life. Sure it wasn’t perfect by any stretch, but it was something.”

“Yeah, life isn’t perfect. Tends to be that way,” Jim said, agreeing on the basis of his own personal reflections. The rolling rumble of thunder joined in on the bout of talk from outside; the weather too was talkative, as well as being furiously drenching.

Having gotten quite comfortable with her woolen blanket and her makeshift seat, another sudden thought crossed the gothic woman’s weary but stoic mind. Entertaining it, Loona exhaled through her nose and asked, almost coyly; “How do people do it?”

“What, life?” A mildly curious look was thrown Loona’s way, the one-man audience seeming genuinely intrigued.

“Nono, I mean… kids. I know, weird question, but I’m legit hella interested. As in, how do people do it, look after them,” Loona pressed with the question, thinking about how Blitz had persevered in treating her as his own despite her glaring difficulties. But aside from that, there was another albeit smaller ulterior reason as to why she was asking; something more to do with her own person.

Jim shook his head and blew through his pursed lips. “Pfff— uh… I mean it’s a case-by-case thing, innit,” he claimed, trying to explain it for himself; “Like yanno, I’ve seen plenty of mothers and fathers here and there. I know a few too, so. They’ve all got their ways, just depends on how their kids are. Suppose you just need to connect with them, understand them — like what your dad did with you.”

“Riiight,” Loona replied, not quite understanding despite her desire to know. It felt like a strange, almost surreal intrigue, like she was studying a concept entirely foreign to her — in reality, in a very literal way, it was. She imagined herself in that position, being the caretaker of an aggravating child, kicking and screaming in all of its nightmarish tantrum-induced strength. The hypothetical made Loona cringe, thankful that it wasn’t reality. She figured that if it was reality, her hellhound instincts would kick in, and… well, the aftermath wouldn’t be pretty.

Suddenly it made sense to Jim, who paused and analyzed Loona’s face. “You’re thinking about it, aren’t ya,” he implied for her with a knowing look; “The job.”

Loona grunted, looking annoyed but only just as she swiped her hair away; “Yeah, I am. And it only took, what, five different times of you nagging me about it?” She froze to think about her next words, choosing them carefully, but not once did she break eye contact. “Like, argh… A-As you said, that offer is the only thing I have. If I don’t take it, then what? I’m a goner. But I hate kids, I actually hate them! They’re gross, annoying, and… and just little assholes, all the same! You-you get the picture, right??”

“Yes Loona, I know what kids are like,” Jim assured, orienting himself around by an inch to face Loona more directly; “But like what’s up, are you nervous about taking it?”

“Uh, duh?! Dude, I’m a moody as fuck hellhound! Last thing you want to do is put me in the same room as some equally moody little brat! You know how that’s gonna turn into? Me in handcuffs,

and a mangled little corpse in the middle of the—…" Like a flick of a switch Loona's throat closed up, strangling the last leg of her rant into silence.

The clarifying reality of what she was saying hit the hellhound like a truck; what was the big idea, saying it so freely like that? Was she that stupid, that insensitive? Flashing in her mind like a clear picture were the painted eyes that had stared at her, the last thing she saw before passing out on that ill-fated job; this was arguably the starting point of the entire mess she now found herself in. But those eyes were more than just painted; they felt real. 'He' had judged her. It wasn't just a painting, no; it was like he was there. Maybe he was, that alone terrified her.

Glumly Loona retreated further into her khaki blanket, pulling the "hood" further over her head until her face was completely shrouded in wool and hair. "See? I'm a mess," she muttered pitifully, sounding just about hopeless.

In all honesty with himself Loona's sudden hypothetical did stun Jim, though he wouldn't admit it aloud. "Put it this way," he began, again looking out into the bucketing rain; "You're very aware of what might happen, the dangers, risks, and so on. That could lower the risk of it happening, right? Like you know that's wrong, so there's less chance of you doing it."

Loona squinted hard, peering back out from within her veil; "That is the most mental gymnastics thing I've ever heard. You know how many times I've figured that something is wrong, but I do it anyway? Drinking, smoking… drugs, sometimes…"

"Yeah, but that's different," Jim pushed on; "We're talking about a whole new responsibility. You telling me that you're concerned about doing something wrong, that tells me you can make the right choices. Starting to think that this is you doubting yourself, that's what I'm hearing. Is that what this is?"

The bullseye had been hit squarely, the stunned look on Loona's pale face being a dead-set indicator that Jim had guessed correctly. The hellhound, as if deeply impacted by the scarily correct assumption, momentarily removed herself from her surroundings and began to think. She was doubting herself, but why? The answer came quickly. Faintly Loona's mouth quivered like she was trying to speak, though her body resisted. But eventually, she prevailed; "Can I tell you a story," Loona finally asked after silent contemplation, a roll of thunder in the distance following afterwards.

"Always one for a story," Jim signaled his readiness to listen. He always did when push came to shove; in this part of the young man's nature Loona found solace.

A deep inner part of Loona told her very emphatically to keep the story quiet, that it wasn't worth telling. But still, in direct spite of her doubts, the gothic woman with much to tell went on to confess. "So this was like a week after Blitz adopted me," Loona began as she gazed off into the storm. She could almost see the story as she told it; "We had a fight. It was huge, a stupidly big one, and I ended up just trashing the place because I hated the fact he had adopted me that much. People think I'm a bitch now, but for those first few weeks I was a fucking nightmare. Didn't even see Blitz as my "dad," I just saw him as this… this-this little red creep, with this creepy idea in his puny brain of wanting to roleplay as a dad. Like okay sure, I still think he's a creep, but, well… he's my dad whether I like it or not, so. But yeah, as I said, there was no connection between us, just nothing. Zilch, literally."

"So yeah, big fight, trashed the place, hated my life. And you know what I did? I ran from "home." Ended up running a good twenty minutes until I finally stopped at this shitty little park I found, full of used needles and all that sorta crap. So I sit down on this bench there, and I must've looked ready to slit someone's throat, 'cause everyone who was within a good five feet away avoided me like the fucking plague. Honestly I was glad, at least then was I able to get some… you know, some actual resemblance of goddamn privacy. Now I'm more angry than I've ever been at this point, right? Absolutely fuming. And all I wanted was to just wish death to the world. So I put my foot down and said "fuck it, I'm going to claim this bench as my own!" And that's exactly what I did. Fuck the world and all of its bullcrap, this uncomfortable bench is my castle, away from it all. My bench, bitch! Like you get the gist, I just wanted to be left the hell alone."

"But you know what happens? Instead of life throwing me a bone, it decides to throw a shit-coated brick, because coming my way is this kid. Even back then I hated kids, but just the look of this fat little red twerp in his dumb green Mammon shirt and cargo pants was particularly infuriating. See he had this stupid little RC car he was racing around, whizzing it around the odd tree, rock, anything his big beady eyes could find. He's racing around this thing, and he decides that it would be a brilliant idea to send it towards the hellhound just about ready to blow her motherfucking top again. So here it comes, whizzing along, and I knew what he was tryna do; steer it around the park bench like some obstacle course. … It ended up smacking me in the leg."

"I saw red. … I-I don't even remember what I did after, but when I woke up to myself, the kid's lifted up by the collar in my grip. And he's crying, bawling even, and his nose is… it's black with blood, like it's broken. He's sobbing, begging for his mom to come help and he's sorry, and I realize then that my fist is covered in his blood too. Must've punched him pretty hard, that's my guess. Then I hear someone yelling up behind me, just screaming my name — it's Blitz. He pulls me away, he's scolding me in that big voice of his, but I just didn't have the energy to fight anymore. So I just followed him home, and we left the kid there with his mom."

The dreadful silence that followed was choking, thick with a stillness only reserved for the eerie calm aftermath of a tragedy. The story was one, after all, rendering its one-man audience speechless.

Thunder rolled again in a low baritone as Loona broke her silence, adding soberly; “That’s why I’m doubting myself here. I can snap just like that, at a whim, you know this! Without even so much of a warning! It sounds paranoid for me to admit, I know, but just the idea of that happening again when I’m tryna recover my life… It scares me.”

Frozen in place was Jim who was left taken aback my a mile, the sheer detail enough to paralyze him. As much as an optimist he was, even he felt the temptation of giving a second thought to minting Loona as a babysitter. As was the established sentiment, the very last thing either of them wanted was a criminal record on the hellhound’s hands, whether involuntary or otherwise. “Well shit,” Jim couldn’t help but say, his voice just audible over the rain; “Yeah that’s… that’s pretty bad.”

Loona’s reply was barely anything at all, except a low single-toned hum and a shy nod of her head — she knew full damn well it sounded awful. It was probably one of the grossest, most cruelest things she had ever heard, and the blame for it was squarely on her own head. It was her crime, and maybe the bruises and the cut to her temple which she had sustained, albeit now advancely faded, was her punishment for that day — now she knew how it felt to be that kid. Loona’s guilt for it was so strong, yet so suppressed underneath a blanket of deep-rooted callous indifference, that it barely translated into feelings. What had kept her alive for so long — that cold indifference to any and all suffering around her — doubled as Loona’s weakness. What she had inherited from the orphanage, that ignorance to feelings, was both a blessing and a curse. Perhaps it was this weakness that caused Loona’s outbursts, a compensation for the emotions that she barely had room to express, for so long; it was this Loona knew, in a subconscious sense.

Though the story left him shook, Jim felt inclined to investigate further for the purpose of Loona’s retelling. “So…” he began on the side of caution; “You’re nervous about lashing out again. That’s what it sounds like to me.”

“Like hell I am,” Loona nodded in all sincerity; “Usually I wouldn’t put this much thought into it, I never have. But I’m in a world of hell right now, and I’m forced to think about this stuff. What if I can’t control it?”

With what remaining optimism he had left, Jim pointed out; “You know what I think it is? Ya don’t have much confidence about yourself, doing new stuff. I don’t mean this in an all bad way, but sometimes it seems you can’t let go of certain things. Fear controls you in that way.”

Loona didn’t answer for a little while, until her late response came, wrapped in a pensive upturn on one corner of her mouth; “Maybe you’re right,” the blanket-encased woman softly croaked, her

voice a low thoughtful rumble — like thunder. In a slow dance Loona's eyes shifted in no particular direction, a hypothetical beginning to brew inside her head. "So say if I did take this thing," the disguised hound began, choosing her words carefully; "I say 'yes' to this whole babysitting horseshit… You honestly think I'll be okay?"

"Fairly sure, yeah," was Jim's seemingly unshakable verdict. He cocked a smile to make his verdict that bit more certain; "Maybe I'm naive that way," he further quipped.

For a mute moment Loona stared at Jim in quiet thought, taking the time to figure out that he wasn't joking; he really believed in her that much. She found it endearing, comforting even. The hellhound snickered, shaking her head; "Tsh-heheh… You know I really wish I had the confidence in myself that you have in me. It's hilarious, it really is. Honestly, I'm jealous." The weak smile that had formed faded into a thin line painted in black lipstick, then turned her gaze to the floor. "I'm just gonna have to prepare myself for this thing, huh," Loona asked in an almost defeated way, reluctantly coming to terms with the lack of alternatives.

"Seems so," Jim grunted as he stretched his arms, joints cracking satisfyingly and all. He looked back outside and noticed that the rain had neutralized into a faint overcast drizzle, as too did Loona. "Hey, look," the young man nudged the goth's shoulder; "Think we'll be able to go in now."

"Ohthankfuck-," Loona found herself mumbling under her breath before leaping up from her seat, khaki blanket still wrapped around her entire frame. She was so enthusiastic about finally going inside that she sprinted across the sodden ground, her shoes becoming lined with a mixture of wet grass and light mud. Into the house Loona went after tossing off her shoes outside, retreating to the vintage soft-fabric couch with a light ***"Fwump!"*** when she fell onto it. Having curled up into a cold, blanketed ball on the couch, Loona got herself comfortable as Jim came sauntering into the living room, stopping just beyond the opposite side of the Persian rug at the foot of said couch. "Before you ask, no, I'm not moving," Loona proclaimed, having claimed her new 'castle'.

"Figured so," Jim played along with hands tucked into his coat pockets. A parted sort of investigating smile crept along his face; "So did I hear a "maybe" to the job?"

This was Loona's "oh shit" moment and she froze in place, her brow raised with an awful surprise. She tried recalling what she might've said, afraid of a slip-up. "Which part," she asked carefully, emphasizing her words in a firm sort of question-demand.

"When ya said you had to work on preparing yourself," Jim recalled from very recent memory, not quite getting it word for word.

The memory of having said that came back to Loona, hitting her like a slap in the face. Sure she did remember saying it, but the fact she had expressed some form of “giving in” meant only one thing; she would need to act. This in turn meant responsibility. “Yess, I did…” Loona groaned reluctantly then and there, rolling herself upright on her backside. Despite her outward dismay of any attempt of training to be a babysitter — however ‘hard’ that may be — the pale woman knew that it was last resort, a resort which she was now at. She had to get back up on her feet, make some money, regain a resemblance of independence; it was now or never. Loona’s vision had grown unfocused before she looked back up at the figure standing beyond the Persian rug, asking carefully in a dramatic groan; “This is gonna wreck me, isn’t it?”

The address was right in front of him; a shady looking three-storey industrial building which had long fallen out of use years ago, right in the center of Greed’s grimey, industrial heart. Moxxie feared the place despite his outward hard-faced appearance which he desperately tried to maintain, with wavering success here and there. But it needed to be done; ‘he’ had instructed him so. After having one last check of his surroundings, making sure that nobody was in sight, the imp drew a breath; *"Okay,”* he exhaled shakily.

And so Moxxie pushed through the large arched double doors, the hinges wailing loudly with years of decay and rust, sounding like a large wounded beast. The painful sound echoed through the large gaping musky interior of the ex-factory’s ground floor, then settled when Moxxie stepped through, black leather briefcase in hand. How foul the air smelt that morning, the smell of engine oil and damp decay polluting any breathable oxygen like a poison. For what felt like an eternity of uncertainty, of unending tension, Moxxie sauntered carefully through the long, vast room. He could barely see a thing, and would be completely blind if not for the flashlight he held in front of him, but even that light was drowned by the unnatural darkness. After having trod a good minute or so deeper into the abandoned factory, Moxxie was starting to feel that he was actually alone; nobody had shown up. Until…

"Moxxieee…” a loud, expecting voice with an unmistakable accent suddenly boomed from the darkness ahead; **“Nevah thought ya’d actually turn up!”** A large, rotund figure emerged from the darkness ahead, his heavy footing creating ripples in the otherwise dead silent space. He wore a dark pin-striped suit custom tailored for his massive, hulking frame, his accustomed Jester’s hat replaced with a large wide-brimmed fedora. Truth be told, without his usual attire, the figure looked like an entirely different person; a large, uncanny marble-white imitation of a human being. One arm of his four-sleeved suit jacket had been folded and closed up with thread, the new sowing lines unmistakable in contrast to the inky blackness of the rest of the suit — an amputation.

The little imp swallowed a lump in his throat, and again his face turned serious; “H-Hello, Mammon.” He watched as half-a-dozen smaller but tall figures of all shapes flanked either side of

the Sin lord, all dressed in tailored attire and all kinds of hats, from trilbys to bowlers. They were his father's men.

"Look at ya, little man! All grown up," Mammon spat with a grin, a cigar protruding from his gross green mouth. The cigar smoke pluming out only added to the 'mafia boss' aesthetic the large figure was going for. "Nevah thought I'd ever see ya again, in the flesh no bloody less!"

"Yeah, heh… T-Times have changed," Moxxie swallowed, trying to maintain his floundering courage.

Mammon took another long drag of his cigar, taking a second to blow out the flavored smoke before drawling; "Now I've heard ya lost ya job, ay? That's what I've heard from a certain little birdie." When Moxxie didn't reply immediately, the Sin took it as an invitation to continue; "I'm really sorry for ya, little man, I really am. 'S a tough thing losin' a job suddenly like that, it isn't fun! Really wish I could give it back to ya."

But Moxxie shook his head, declining; "I don't want it back. I-I want to live my life as I want to, make money as I see fit. No more being pushed around by some-some moron who thinks he can toss me around!"

A huge, disgustingly pleased grin appeared on Mammon, and he chuckled deeply; "I LOVE this confidence for ya! Golden, truly bloody golden! It-It's like ya've waken up to yaself, given yaself new life!"

"Ahah, yeah. Tha-That's right," Moxxie laughed nervously, glancing over at the bodyguards on either side of the great Sin. Their faces were wholly unreadable outside of being cold and serious, a deliberate and direct form of intimidation; to let Moxxie know his place, so to speak.

The huge toothy grin plastered across Mammon's face faded, and he coughed; "Ahem— A-Anyhow, little mate, we need to talk. Just a friendly one between us, ya get me?" Again Moxxie didn't reply, seemingly frozen in silence, but the sure nod of his head proved that the imp was still 'with it'. "Great, excellent. Now ya know I know you're a man of sweet revenge, Mox'. I know ya have it in like, just like ya dad! And I'm sure, deep within that puny lil' exterior of yours, ya wanna take out revenge on that old man, for… well, yanno… what he did to your ma. I'm sorry for what happened to her, matey, we all are."

Adrenaline coursed through the imp's body, paralyzing him just like that. Moxxie let out a shuddering breath at the mere mention of that day. He hated being reminded. He swore he could still hear her scream, just before she took the plunge, bubbles in the sick, murky bayou water growing ever smaller as she disappeared. A single tear rolled down his cheek, and he swallowed the sizable lump in his throat; "I don't want revenge," Moxxie squeezed out, trying not to devolve into tears; "N-…Not for mom…"

"Awwh come on Moxxie," Mammon bursted out, almost sounding like he was having fun; "Don't give me that bullshit! I know ya have it in ya, that good old 'Cognome revenge' blood! I can see it in ya as we speak! An' speaking of revenge, I reckon that time is comin' very soon. Yes, very soon… Ya father's dyin'."

The Greed imp froze in place, his nervous jitters ceasing in that very second; "He-He's what?"

"He's dying," Crimson's right-hand man, a shark demon by the name of Alessio, repeated for translation purposes, stepping forward from Mammon's side; "Cancer's spread into his lungs from his throat. We reckon he's only got two days to live."

"An' we both know what that means, don't we little man," Mammon added, his horrible grin returning; "The same ol' story like every othah family with a throne. Ya old man occupies his, his empire-o'-dirt, but he's aboutta give up the ghost. Kick the bucket, yanno? He needs a successor. And all that old bastard's got as a successor… well that's you, mate."

Moxxie squirmed uncomfortably where he stood, his knees beginning to feel weak; "B-But what if I don't wanna?"

"You got no choice," Alessio spoke once again, his accent thick on his breath; "You either take it, or you risk death. That is on the boss' will. You've been doing good for us for the past three months, on our agreement since the wedding incident. Don't make us do this, Moxxie, we've always thought highly of you."

"No…" The Cognome Family heir to the throne staggered back, a million thoughts and anxious feelings coursing through his very being. One particular thought snapped forth; "B-But Millie. But my wife! What will she think? I-If she finds out about all this, she'll—"

"She doesn't ***MATTER*** here, ya dumbarse!!" Mammon's voice boomed like an explosion through the vast chamber that was the old factory; "Ya gotta be selfish in life sometimes, so ya can make

the right decisions! All this shit about love, an' marriage, an' all that lah-dee-dah rubbish, it doesn't matter! Who gives a fuck what she'll think anyhow?! It's your life, ain't it?? She should support ya instead, in the tough decisions!" Everyone on either side of him looked perturbed by Mammon's sudden outburst, the cigar smoke billowing through his teeth and nostrils making him look like a mad bull — and that he was at the best of times. The 'mad bull' continued; "I've already had a fucken amputation because of some ***WHORE MUTT,*** I don't need you going all chickenshit ovah somethin' ya need to do on top of it!"

Moxxie looked beyond petrified, any courage that he had left having been completely stripped away by Mammon's furious tirade. The shaken imp glanced again at the Sin's sewn sleeve; Loona really had done a number to him, but how? That was a question for another far more appropriate time. "Wh-What do you want from me," Moxxie instead asked, knowing full well what they wanted.

The imp's assumption was correct. "For ya to lead us," Alessio replied, his rock-hard expression unchanged; "Into a new era. You have Lord Mammon on our side, and he has much confidence in you. We all do. Take the throne, and your life will be without any more worry."

"But first," Mammon added in his growling, coarse voice; "That briefcase. Is that the stuff?" When Moxxie nodded, a low chuckle emitted from down in the Sin's throat, the cigar smoke shooting through his teeth; "Excellent. Fucken excellent."

Song and Dance

The news article Verosika read was loud and clear with its bold printed letters: ***"SUCCUBUS SPECTACULAR — Star Singer Verosika expected to perform in front of High-Ranking Officials!"*** The succubus' eyes burned into the phone's screen as she mulled over the list of names further down the page, having familiarized herself with them days before. Everyone of any notable power would be in attendance; from the Sins, to the goetias, and everyone else in between who had even a minute sway of things in each ring.

Usually Verosika welcomed the publicity from the tabloids and their suck-up, privacy-breaching journalists, though this year felt different. After having been on hiatus from performing since her "intruder incident", this upcoming display of artistic grandeur was going to be her first performance. Because of this, and some other inexplicable reason, the tabloids had gotten especially nasty about their rumors and speculations. Some had gossiped from their dingy, sleazy publishing offices that Verosika had gotten back to drinking heavily; while others expressed confidence that the star succubus had lost her talent, beginning her decline as all celebrities eventually do. One particular one disgusted the heavily-scrutinized Verosika the most — the "bodyguard affair" claim, and a brave claim it was, that Vortex had been having a not-so-secret affair with his employee. The claim made Verosika sick, physically sick, and she intended to sue.

As she chucked her phone onto the tabletop of her dressing room, Verosika sneered. "Ugh. These people," the succubus groaned, squinting at the mirror in front of her through a pair of blacked-out round glasses; "Would you ever think they would respect privacy? Of course they wouldn't, the lowlifes. They feed off gossip and scrutiny like vultures to a corpse!"

"Yup! Couldn't have said it better myself, fucking slimebags..." The gravelly voice which replied from her pristine velvet sofa was none certain 'Fizzarolli', a long-time associate and friend to the illustrious, well-renowned performer.

What started as a mere publicity boost for Fizzarolli at the hands of Mammon had grown into a true friendship, of mutual respect and trust between two "rags to riches" performers that had made names for themselves. Lies, slander, intense scrutiny; the undefeatable Verosika and the bravely defiant Fizzarolli had suffered if all, and in this they found a wholly comfortable unity. The past few weeks had been especially difficult for either of them. On one hand, the high expectations on Verosika's part for the big night. While on the other, Fizzarolli's recently exposed relationship with the King of Lust himself. In short, both of them were in, as they say, "deep shit."

With his robotic leg crossed over his artificial electronic knee, Fizzarolli glared at the poster gripped in his hands. Verosika had given it to him so he could have a critiquing look for himself, his reaction to it being much the same as the Succubus' — disapproval. Every conceivable thing

was wrong with it; the way they painted Verosika's face, her pose, the way the long dark-purple dress clashed with the dark background of the poster, and so much more. It was all wrong, but there was nothing they could do about it. Showing the final product back towards Verosika, Fizzarolli marveled with a disbelieving look; "Holy shit, they're seriously rolling with this?"

"Ee-yep! That's what they said," Verosika stated and tossed her phone onto the makeup table, having grown tired of whatever malarkey was going on inside it. She rubbed her temple in a dull agony which thumped inside her skull; "Honestly, I can't stand these shit-kickers. Seriously Fizz, I reckon these stage managers are the worst they've ever been! Doesn't help that they've been hand-picked by Lucifer's poshy tuxedo boys, so I don't even know half of them."

"The key to good showbiz is being around those you know and trust," Fizzarolli said loud and clear, pronouncing it on good authority that he knew exactly what he was talking about.

"No, exactly right," Verosika agreed wholeheartedly as she swung around in her chair; "Like the connection isn't there! I don't feel anything for these cherry-picked, yes-man schmucks, and they don't feel anything for me. They're just there to tick boxes and make sure things go the head honcho's way, no better than middle managers!"

This prompted a boisterous cackle from Fizzarolli who tossed the borderline insulting poster aside, scrunching it up like it was nothing — for all intents and purposes, it was. "Ough, I can imagine! Yanno what I would do," the ex-circus imp began; "I'd just do my own thing regardless. Agree to whatever claptrap they want you to do — "yes, yes, yes," yadda yadda — then when the big day comes, give it your own personal spin! Sure they're gonna get cheesed off with ya for not doing *exactly* what they say, but what are they gonna do? You're 'the' Verosika!"

Verosika had her doubts; "They could blackmail me," she muttered in direct contrast to the imp's charisma. This particular fear wasn't unfounded, as not only was it an infamous intimidation tactic, Verosika had it happen to her before. "Plus, they're coming to see me today, in the next hour or so," the entertainer said as she leaned back in her seat; "Been told that it's gonna be a pep talk, going over the whole thing with me — for the fourth time this week! It's like they're adamant that this goes their way, how they want to. Ugh- I swear, it's all gonna drive me to drink again…"

An instantaneous red flag arose. "Hey. Hey c'mon now, V, don't say that," Fizzarolli immediately began coaxing; "Don't let them do that to you. They're nothing to booze out about."

Verosika put her hand up in a wave; "I know, Fizz, I know. I'm just saying," she reassured, trying to smile as best she could despite the stress. Speaking of drinking, the succubus' eyes caught a glance

of her flask resting on the makeup table, the Beelzejuice which swirled inside out of sight behind the cylindrical steel walls. The flask's owner lightly furrowed her brow and noted aloud; "It's been tasting strange lately…"

"What has," Fizzarolli asked out of curiosity.

"The Beelzejuice," the pop star replied and grabbed the container, popping off the lid before taking a brief sniff; "Snff! …Hm. Kinda smells different, too."

Fizzarolli's interest was only piqued more; "Does it," he asked and gestured for the succubus to hand it over. With the flask in his robotic hands, the imp took an investigative sniff for himself, scrunching his nose while he tried to make note of any discernible difference. "Mmm… Nah, I can't smell anything different. 'S just good ol' Beelzejuice to me."

To Verosika's own judgment it was a different story. While yes it looked, smelled, and tasted exactly like any other variation of Beelzejuice she had before, there was an indescribable change underneath that fruity flavor. Something had been changed, yet Verosika, for the life of her, couldn't figure out what that change was. Maybe she was going nuts, a bout of withdrawal symptoms after years of being on 'the hard stuff' — at least that's what she hoped.

Just as Fizzarolli handed the flask back to Verosika, a thrice-fold knock rattled the dressing room door. It opened without a second's waste, revealing Vortex in his usual attire on the other side. "Hey boss, sorry to bother you," the large-build hellhound excused himself; "We got the organizers out there, they just arrived."

"*Ohherewego*— Tell them I'll be out in a minute," Verosika instructed first, then noticed the underlying dejected look on her bodyguard's face. He looked troubled, as he had been for most of the morning. "'Tex, hun, are you sure you're okay? You've been worrying me all morning."

His boss' concern was earnest and sincere, but that didn't deter Vortex from playing whatever ailed him off. "I'm fine, boss, don't worry," he assured with a weak smile, pausing a second in hesitation before carefully shutting the door.

"Huh…" Fizzarolli hummed, taking notice of the hound's strange demeanor; "What's up with him?"

“Ditto,” Verosika only quietly half-answered, trying to figure that one out for herself. She would definitely revisit the question later, burying it in the back of her mind as she pulled herself up from her seat. “Would ya mind coming with me, Fizz,” Verosika asked, almost pleading; “Just to talk to these people.”

“Uh, yeah sure,” Fizzarolli nodded and got up himself, feeling a little obligated to accompany an old friend.

The pink pop star expressed how obliged she was as she left her dressing room, the pair of entertainers thus escorted down the hall by their formidable-looking bodyguard. From somewhere beyond the end of the hallway came the light chatter of men, perhaps a small group of them with a headcount of five to six, their individual voices varying distinctly yet thick in the same family of accent. Through the open doorway the Succubus’ entourage went and out onto a stage, the spotlights overhead providing plentiful illumination for the half-a-dozen figures that stood in a tight-knitted group. Verosika’s heels heralded her arrival, prompting the figure with his black and white-bordered overcoat to turn around.

From behind his round spectacles, the figure’s bloodshot eyes lit up, the only emotion coming through his fully-bandaged face. “Ah! Und you must be our most graceful entertainer,” he guessed with an outward compliment to go. He stepped away from his group of comrades and sauntered in a light trod towards the arriving party.

Verosika didn’t pay any attention to the compliment. “Huff... Yep, that’s me,” she begrudgingly replied, whatever warmth the bandage-masked figure was trying to offer evidently not replicated.

Whether undeterred to the less-than-warm reception or otherwise, the sharply dressed specimen persisted; “Good, very good! Vonderful to finally have direct correspondence vith you. Vhat an honor, right gentlemen?” The equally-as-tailored figures behind the apparent leader agreed in a mixture of nods and agreeable utterances. Spinning his head back around from his own entourage, the Sinner outstretched a black-gloved hand towards Verosika for a handshake, an offer which the renowned performer reluctantly accepted. The bandage mask bunched up around the cheeks as though its wearer was smiling, the ‘friendly’ chuckle he emitted being further evidence of so. “I do apologize for zhe rather, how say… short notice ve gave you. Hope ve didn’t interrupt anything too important.”

“No, no, not at all. Just love being here, honestly,” was the breathless, insincere reply from Verosika’s part, remembering Fizzarolli’s advice from earlier on dealing with mindless ‘claptrap’. It helped with desensitizing her from whatever was to come; demand, threat, or so forth.

There was barely any telling whether the Sinner was satisfied with Verosika's current answers, but the subject was set aside when he noticed in the pop star's midst another noteworthy figure. His bloodshot eyes squinted in recognition; "Now vhere have I seen your face before?" A pointed black leather-clad finger twirled in the air while its owner's mind jogged. Then finally, eureka; "Oh! You must be, uh… Fonzolli, yes? The-The circus clown, uh, thing."

"Yeah, it's actually 'Fizzarolli', thank you very much," the imp replied with a notable ounce of annoyance.

"Ja, ja, that name. Vonderful to have you, wunderbar," the tall, dull-colored figure almost dismissively acknowledged, barely even giving the shortest of the three anything more than a glance. "So anyhow," the Sinner continued; "I trust you've been given a rundown on what is to happen."

"A general idea, yeah," Verosika nodded along; "But if I can complain about one thing, it's gotta be that… 'thing' you call a dress. Gotta appreciate the seamstresses you hired for it, but long flowy dresses? Nope. No can do, sorry, not my vibe."

At once the Sinner's confident and steady demeanor shapeshifted into perplexity, those unattractively blood vein-plagued eyes narrowing which showed more of his equally red, raw-appearing skin. "Not your… Vhat does that mean, 'your vibe'? This isn't one of zhose new phrases, is it?"

"Huh?? Ohh, that's right, you're old," Verosika realized aloud, throwing manners right out the window; "I mean that glorified purple corset of yours isn't my style, who I am. I'm not some petite little barbie doll you can just throw anything on like a show pony. There's a certain dress code I run by, mister…" The Sinner calmly gave out his name to her, allowing Verosika to utilize it; "Right, 'Heinrich'. If you're going to prop me up in one of your tacky costumes, at least model it by my rules. I do have a brand to keep up, that and dignity!"

The Sinner known as 'Heinrich' flexed his brow and muttered under his breath, something along the lines of "some dignity." Rightly Verosika was about to snap back about the sly muttered remark, but not before the Sinner interrupted; "I vouldn't zhink zhat harshly about zhe dress. Personally if I vere you, *geister verbieten,* I'd zhink of it as a… a sort of expansion of your current image. In business terms, an evolution of your brand! Zhat's zhe nature of show business after all, isn't it? Innovation, elaboration, rectification, evolution — changes. Some are big, some are small."

Try as ‘Heinrich’ might to convince, the stubborn-minded Verosika was not one to be persuaded, especially on her public image. She scoffed in near disgust and stated firmly; “Excuse me, but do you have any idea of what kinda scrutiny I’m under right now? Out there in public, do you have even the faintest fucking idea?? I’ve got all of these allegations over my head INCLUDING my mental health, I don’t need “dressing up like Marie Antoinette” to be added to that list!”

“But zhis is your opportunity to prove your detractors wrong,” came Heinrich’s response with an enthusiastic growling flare. He stepped backwards a few paces before spinning around on his boot heels, looking out into the massive space that was the concert hall. The place was luxurious, dramatically so, with three levels-worth of balconies brimming with seats, and private VIP balconies on either side. Every single inch of the place was decorated with marvelous patterns of glimmering gold, striking silver, prestigious sandstone, and impossibly expensive marble. A gigantic chandelier hung overhead, dwarfing the rows of seats below. “Your big break is vithin arm’s reach,” Heinrich affirmed, opening his arms out towards the massive vacant house; “All zhat you need to do is to reach out for it. Grab it by the neck, and your name vill be basked in glory! I assure you zhat, vith confidence.”

“He’s correct,” another voice spoke up from the group of Sinners behind Verosika. She turned around to see one of them had stepped forward, the particularly large one of the group with a very noticeable round midsection. The girthy figure in his broad, protruding light gray buttonless tunic made his presence known, his plethora of medals clattering against one another like the tinkling sound of fine gold. “You will not regret taking this opportunity. This will be the magnum opus of your entire career,” the Sinner assured with calm confidence, his English considerably more fluent than his compatriots.

The succubus, listening to all of this, still hadn’t shifted from her reservations. The prospect of a sort of ‘evolution’ of her image, however, did in fact tap into a part of her; a part of her which hungered for fame. It was very much like blood instinct. “W-Wait, hold on a minute,” Verosika suddenly interjected, raising her hands; “So what exactly do you want me to sing? What’re we looking at here?”

“Vas afraid you’d never ask,” this ‘Heinrich’ said, pacing back towards the pop star in a deliberate slow waltz; “I take it zhat you’re not- eh… familiar vith the deutshe Sprache. German, in other vords, apologies. Ideally ve vould’ve have you perform one of Lale Andersen’s stunners. However, zhe general consensus among us vas that zhe Englander equivalent vould—” — ***Bzz-Bzz! Bzz-Bzz!**** — A sudden loud buzz nudged itself into the back-and-forth, making itself known with great self-perceived importance. All eyes turned to the circus imp of Lust, who just by the wince on his face told everyone that the ringtone belonged to him. “You can answer zhat,” Heinrich invited with a permissive flick of his hand, like he had any authority of the imp’s autonomy.

“Oh! Ye-Yeah, uhm, thank you,” Fizzarolli forced himself to grin, his feigned toothy smile disappearing as soon as he whirled around, brushing past Vortex who stood guard by his boss. In

haste Fizzarolli went backstage, the vibrating phone gripped in his hands; it was Blitz, and he couldn't have called at a worse time. Gritting his teeth and making sure he was alone, the already on edge Fizzarolli answered the sporadic phone call; "Hey-hey, uh, Blitz! Sorry man, I don't think now's really the best time to talk."

"Did you talk to him?" The question was firm, cold, and straight to the point, the voice which carried it flat yet brimming with hurt all at the same time.

There was small wonder on who 'he' was, Fizzarolli knew full well. "I, uh… I… haven't yet. But I will! I'll do it today, in the hour! Big guy's just gotta come ba—…" The guttural bereaved exhale that buzzed into the imp's ear cut him off, a long sound of utter disappointment and dejection. "Look, Blitz, I haven't forgotten, I promise! Things've been hectic 'round here for a hot minute, it's been a whole world of shit, so—"

"Don't talk to me about a world of shit, Fizz," Blitz uttered in a low, unsettling growl; *"I AM in a world of shit! I'm right here, right the fuck now, and I'm drowning right up to my nose in it! Do you wanna help me with this or not, or do ya wanna keep screwing around with me like everyone else?!"* Scary enough that the outburst was, the cherry on top was just how maliciously desperate Blitz sounded. He sounded like he was being held at gunpoint, and his life all depended on what his ex-circus partner did.

As concerned as Fizzarolli was for the fellow imp, he didn't appreciate being snapped at. "Dammit Blitz! I have a life, too," he snapped back; "I get caught up in all sorts of crap, and today's especially no exception! My schedule's packed, and so is Ozzie's, so you just gotta be a little patient."

"Oh, I get it, my daughter's life isn't important to you! Gotcha!"

"Whatthe— It ain't like that Blitz, come on!"

"What is it like then?!"

"Blitz I swear to fuck, if you don't stop giving me lip, I'll hang up the call! I'm being so fucking real right now!" This seemed to be enough to goad Blitz into silence, to come to his senses or what little he had left. "Blitz, bud, come on. I know you're in the shit, but just listen carefully for a sec, 'kay? As soon as Ozzie comes back, I'll get him to call you. We-We can discuss what we can do for your daughter from there."

“I’m sick and fucking tired of waiting, Fizz, it’s been three days!”

“I know how long it’s been! I know that, and I’m sorry,” Fizzarolli emphatically excused himself, peering back out onto the stage from a crack in the curtain; “It’s just… look, we’re in the middle of organizing this whole concert thing that’s supposed to happen in a few days. We barely got twenty-four hours notice for this, so I’m tryna help Verosika prepare. I promised I would!”

“…You’re helping Verosika. … Ohhh I get it! Helping HER instead of finding my daughter is just that bit more important! Great to fucking know, BUDDY PAL, even after having saved you from that yippie-ki-yay cockbag!!”

The last straw had just been spent for Fizzarolli who was about to hang up, but not before his saving grace came up from behind him. At long last the King of Lust had returned, his gigantic frame having just squeezed through the doorway, now towering over his far smaller lover. The pale-faced imp took notice of the giant Sin’s presence with much relief; “Oh thank fuck you’re back! Ozzie please, I need you to help me here!”

‘Ozzie’ blinked; “Say what now, what’s going on,” he cluelessly asked, only having been back a whole ten seconds.

“It’s Blitz, he’s on the phone with me,” Fizzarolli filled in with a hushed tone, having momentarily put his microphone on mute; “He needs to talk to you, it’s urgent.”

Ozzie’s mouth fell slack as he was handed his lover’s phone, the device easily dwarfed in between his massive fingers. Fizzarolli watched as the Sin took the reins of the problem, beginning to converse with the frantic imp on the other end of the line. What started as productive talk between the two vastly different societal classes, with a glimmer of hope for a positive resolution living and breathing, turned into a matter of doubt when Asmodeus’ expression dimmed. With a sorrowful look he glanced at the clown imp who he loved standing before him, the regret in his eyes telling Fizzarolli all that he needed to know. It wasn’t assuring news.

What both the clown imp and lustful Sin knew was conveyed in regretful words by the King of Lust himself; “Blitz, I… Blitz. You need to listen to me very carefully, okay? … You are? Alright. … I-I don’t think there’s anything I can do for you. … No, Blitz, it was a decision made beyond my power, I can’t override it. What's done is done according to Lucifer, that means anything I try to do goes directly against his authority. I’m sorry.”

Even from where he stood Fizzarolli could hear the absolute abuse that Blitz was hammering through the phone, the naturally vulgar man metamorphosed into an angry, wrathful beast. In Blitz's unhinged anger, Fizzarolli caught the distinct vowels of a certain slur which made him nearly choke. Fear arose when he too saw Ozzie's mane of fire flare up with intensity, the flame growing a hotter greenish-blue; Fizzarolli could feel the heat, even from the distance which he stood.

Forcing himself to simmer down with a shuddered breath, the aristocrat under pressure began to warn, punctuating every word in a highly serious tone. **"Blitz,"** he began in all seriousness; "I don't think you quite realize what exactly you're asking me to do. You're asking me to override a direct order from Lucifer, the ***King of Hades.*** Do you have any idea how dangerous that is, not just for myself, but for you too? Trust me, you don't want to know what happens when anyone goes against his rulings, let alone an imp."

The way the tall and imposing Asmodeus spoke slowly and deliberately into the puny phone was unsettling, and nobody was more unsettled than Fizzarolli, who stood there and watched in surprise. In all the time that he had known his lover, Fizzarolli had never seen his beloved 'Ozzie' act so cold and dead serious; it was like a switch had been thrown, changing the Sin from the one he knew into an entirely different being. The imp didn't like it, not at all.

"And that's admirable that you'd do that for her," the King of Lust commended with sympathy, still in that chillingly serious tone; "But there's a difference between bravery and stupidity. Come on man, please thi—…" Ozzie froze in place and lowered the phone from his ear, glaring down at the screen; "…He hung up."

"Urgh, fuck me…" Fizzarolli groaned and rubbed the bridge of his nose, a spontaneous headache having set in; "So you can't do anything for him?"

Whatever hope was left was met with a heavy sigh and a meek shake of his head. "A ruling's a ruling," was Ozzie's somber reply.

And with that after much promise, Fizzarolli's hopes of helping an old reconciled friend was extinguished. As sad as it was to hear and come to terms with, it was true. There was no higher authority in all of hell than the hermit king himself, with his fist of steel and his judgment of unimaginable malicious firmness. However, one thing Fizzarolli knew for certain was that Blitz, for as crass and reckless as he was, was also stubborn; he wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, not even from the devil himself. What the defiant imp's rebuke would come in the form of was uncertain; that alone unsettled the great Fizzarolli.

Pushing through the stage curtain from behind Fizzarolli was Verosika, who let out a puff of what sounded like relief. “They’ll redesign my outfit,” the succubus announced, a sure victory to preserve her dignity. Grasped in her hands and tucked protectively underneath her arm was a large record sleeve, a black and white print of a smiling woman’s profile etched into the cover. Verosika pulled it up from under her arm and showed it off. She pulled an almost scoffing look which contorted her face; “My ‘magnum opus’, apparently!”

“~We’ll meet again,

Don’t know where, don’t know wheeeeen,

But I know we’ll meet again some sunny daaaaay~”

“~Keep smiling through,

Just like you, always doooooo,

‘Til the blue skies drive the dark clouds, faaar awayyy~”

“Older than dirt” — this was the rather unflattering description that Verosika associated with the song she was now listening to. In fact, no, she found other more fitting descriptions for it; archaic, sappy, antique, painfully out of date, yet neat in its own, sorely, dust-smeared, old-fashioned right.

The record was old and incompatible with anything that Verosika had on hand, the oldest thing that she owned music-wise being a CD from roughly thirty-five years ago, along with the player. It was only thanks to the fact that Asmodeus, being a fossil himself, had something along the lines of “record player” in his possession, obliging to bring it in at such short notice with a quick pop in-and-out from his palace. Now this blast from the past was playing inside Verosika’s dressing room, the archaic, agonizingly sappy tune crackling through the floral-patterned brass horn with the star of the cover performing for her demonic audience.

As it played, Verosika pondered it carefully, analyzing it with a critique’s intensity. “Hm. She’s got good chords,” the succubus commented half-mindedly, her fist propping her head up whilst she lounged cross-legged in her chair; “Handles her voice well. … It’s nice, I guess… How old didja say this was, Fizz?”

“Err… N-Nearly eighty years old, I think. From the looks of it,” Fizzarolli guessed roughly, glancing over at the stored record sleeve. He too was under the same enthused spell that his compatriot in show business was, listening to every note and taking much note of its silky smooth rhythm.

The question yet to be answered was how would Verosika pull this off, for as far as she was aware she had never performed anything quite like this. Her style was pop, punk rock, and everything in between; this song was in a different league of its own, an uncharted territory for the pop star of high acclaim. And so Verosika pondered in silence, going over her approach to it while taking a sip of her canteen. The Beelzejuice still tasted different, and the succubus deep in thought wasn’t any closer to figuring out why. “You think I should talk to her about it,” she finally asked, looking down at the little container in her grip.

“Ask who,” Fizzarolli pressed, tilting his head the succubus’ way.

“Bee herself,” Verosika duly elaborated; “There’s just something about this batch that doesn’t sit right. It’s different.”

The imp, having just caught on to Verosika’s interest in her drink, cocked up a brow; “You’re really thinking about it, huh? I mean, it’s Beelzejuice, might just be a new type or something like that.”

“Yeah..” Verosika replied in a wandering way, not really trusting Fizzarolli’s own judgment on it. She looked back down into her drink, almost dwelling on the self-perceived wrongness of it; “Might be…”

“~So will you please say “hello,” to the folks that I know,

Tell them I won’t be loooong…

They’ll be happy to know, that as you saw me go,

I was siii-nging this soooong~”

“~We’ll meet again,

Don’t know where, don’t know wheeeeen,

But I know we’ll meet again, some suuu-nnnny daaaaaay~”

Cousin

February, 1919 — London. Encounter plus twenty-one days.

"Here we are, Sir," announced the sharply dressed driver, slowing the polished black vehicle down as he navigated it through the gates of Buckingham Palace, and into its strictly guarded yard. Scattered growths of snow peppered the grounds on which the tyres rolled over at a walking pace, grimy with foot traffic and colored with the same muggy gray as the overcast sky above.

Sitting with a pensive demeanor in the rear leather seating was Captain Boswell, having returned from the North Russian front on leave. His khaki uniform was thoroughly cleaned the night before for the exceptional occasion which fell upon him today. An extraordinary occasion it was going to be indeed, meeting the supreme head of His Majesty's Army himself in discussion of that front in the taiga. Boswell didn't dare speak as the private car slowed to a stop, arriving at the front of the palace's main entrance, attended to by a pair of the King's Guards. Much like the overcast sky, the guards' vibrant red tunics had been replaced with a long muted gray coat, suitable for the unforgiving cold of southern England in that time of year.

To a stop the black Austin came, parking in front of the steps, while a man dressed in a sharp suit came to open the passenger door. A short "thank you" was what Captain Boswell gave to the driver before stepping out, donning his badged service cap and adjusting it from the front and back. Clenched firmly in his right hand was a black leather briefcase, the British Coat of Arms printed in gold on the front and center.

The finely tailored gentleman who greeted the serviceman was an older man, perhaps in his fifties, who sported a thick set of gray sideburns ripped right out of the last century. His hairline left much to be desired, which had receded to roughly the center of his pale dome. "You're just in time, Sir," the greeter remarked in a thick southern English accent, with the speaking manner of higher society; "His Majesty has just prepared himself. He's expecting you in his living quarters."

"Well, uh.. I'm glad to not be of much surprise," Captain Boswell said with a fickle smile, though his mind was full of trouble; "Will he be in the mood to listen, I-I mean to the report? It isn't good news, I'm afraid."

"Unfortunately I'm not in his head," the secretary said in regret; "But he'll want to know the details, Sir, no matter their nature."

“I understand, greatly,” was Captain Boswell’s sympathetic reply, which came in a half mutter as he ascended up the steps; “But I’m not sure if he’ll be too happy to hear what I bring.”

“You’re only doing your duty, Sir. That His Majesty understands as well as you and I do,” the balding gentleman said as he led the Captain inside, leading him into the prestigious interior of the palace. “He navigated his Empire through the last war, bad news isn’t new territory for him.”

“Yes, I wouldn’t imagine so,” was the Captain’s utterance as he walked deeper into the palace, trudging up a flight of broad fine oak stairs which led to the second floor.

All in all the vast majority of Buckingham Palace that morning was quiet, save for the odd maid or servant who passed by in their strictly smart attire without a fuss. Things ran akin to intricate clockwork in there — The same couldn’t be said for the front which Captain Boswell oversaw, with all of that snow, frost, and near impossible conditions his troop had to withstand. From the time which he had left no more than a week before, the snow though still choking had relented, allowing for the logistics issue to be rectified to a minimal extent. This relaxation of conditions in his favor however hadn’t swayed Boswell from his emerging conviction; the expeditionary force was coming to a dead-end. With consistent supply chain issues, raids from revolutionaries, and the unfavorable weather conditions, there was no feasible way forward that the noble Captain Boswell could see.

“How are things in Russia? In Archangel, or whatever the place is called,” the chauffeur suddenly inquired, seeming curious. As he asked this, he led the serviceman through the long hallway down to the living quarters, the home stretch before His Majesty’s audience.

“Difficult as always,” Captain Boswell gravely replied in a brief rundown, shaking his head stiffly; “Hasn’t gotten any better since Christmas. Arguably it’s been worse.”

“So I’ve heard whispers,” the sideburn-sporting gentleman uttered gravely, and left it at that. An aftertaste of dismay rang from the way the gentleman spoke of said whispers.

Hesitation to talk about the relief force was rife, even in the inner machinations of government and palace alike. For nigh on eleven months had the North Russia Relief Force been active, and so far the precarious and often brutal operation had refused to bear fruit. Reservations were beginning to sprout in all walks of life, from the mere volunteers to the most important of the British High Command. With the great four-year war fresh in their memories, and with a chaotic mainland Europe still reeling from the wounds, the appetite for war had quickly become depleted. Peace was everyone’s desire, but the war to the east denied Europe and its people that solace. And so the new war continued; resisted, yet unabated.

In unison both men marched down the corridor, passing windows hazed by the outside flaking snow which glided down from the overcast skies. Before too long they came to a halt in front of a pair of paneled double doors, the gold handle having been freshly tended to with polish. The chauffeur took a formal step forwards and raised his hand to the door, giving it a short, polite series of knocks. *"Come in,"* a muffled voice replied from within.

Without a second's delay the suited gentleman opened the door, and stepped forth into the living quarters. He turned to an unseen presence and stood at upright attention, and stiff as a board; "Captain Boswell, Your Majesty," the servant announced in formal earnest.

The Captain's presence had been announced to his utmost superior, prompting the Captain himself to step inside and begin the audience — It's no good to keep a King waiting. Once in, Boswell turned to where his guide was looking and clicked his heels, standing at attention for the head of the army. There stood 'he', the head of both civil and military authorities; the staunch, formidable embodient of the Empire himself — His Majesty The King, George The Fifth, the supreme authority across no less than a third of the globe, dressed in a "casual" black suit, tie, and double breasted waistcoat. He looked ready for business, his expression devoid of excitement telling his audience as much, only amplified by his well-trimmed beard which was just starting to gray with age.

At first there was a period of quiet between the three men, up until when the supreme authority of them all cleared his throat and stepped forward. "Good morning, Captain," the royal patriarch greeted with a humble tone, his deep upper class accent thick on his breath. The King outstretched his hand for a shake.

A nervous lump formed in the visitor's throat, then aptly swallowed away with haste. "Your Majesty," Captain Boswell duly greeted back, indeed shaking His Majesty's firm old hand with as much respect as he was given. He felt his nerves begin to tighten, being in the presence of such a prominent, important man.

'His Majesty's' serious yet cordial expression was complete with a brief smile as he asked; "Wonderful to see you in good health. I'm sure it's been challenging, adjusting to the sudden change in climate. From what I hear, it's been quite difficult for our men."

"Oh no, not to worry, Your Majesty. It's been quite alright," Captain Boswell aided the King's concern. As he said so, the Captain heard the sound of the servant leaving the room, shutting the door behind him without interrupting the audience. One passing glance back at the door later,

Boswell cleared his throat and got to business, not wanting to waste another moment's time. "Your Majesty," he began in earnest; "I have a report with me, from the relief force. As was requested."

The King's demeanor too became more serious, and he shifted weight on his feet with a faint rock. "And so you have," came George of Windsor's acknowledgement, his blue eyes focusing briefly on the briefcase in the Captain's hand before looking back up. The King flicked his hand in a gesture to follow him, leading the presentably weary Boswell to a table towards the far corner of the room, to the right of the large fireplace which glowed with a welcoming fire.

Setting down the leather briefcase backfirst onto the table, Captain Boswell undid the straps and flipped the top open. There within was an array of documents, all confidential and all as important as the other; a logistics report, a casualties and incident report, a signed multiple-paged document from the relief force, and a singular photograph.

Sorting the contents of the briefcase across the table, Captain Boswell gave his report; "It's been an unfavourable five weeks, Your Majesty, I regret to inform you. The weather up there in Arkhangelsk is particularly unforgiving, especially throughout January. Logistics have been tight, manpower has been hindered by both illness and Bolshevist attacks, and coordination between our forces, the French, and the Americans has been difficult. But somehow we're managing."

"Yes, so I've heard…" the King muttered thoughtfully, mulling over every document presented to him; "And what's this I heard of an… 'incident?' I was informed of one that occurred last month, is it true?"

Immediately Captain Boswell knew what his highest superior was referring to. A grave apprehension arose within him, thinking back to the halved, mangled corpse which he had the displeasure of witnessing. At first the Captain tried to speak, though words failed him and his agape mouth hung awkwardly underneath his thick mustache. "I'm afraid it is, Sir," the serviceman finally choked. He pointed towards a particular place on the display table; "As you can see here towards the bottom of this casualty report, there is mention of a number of our men dying in an unforeseen event." Watching as the King picked up the casualties report, Boswell continued as woeful narration; "They were a platoon of men stationed to the Southwest of Arkhangelsk, covering for the French platoon there usually. From what we could gather, something went wrong and the French platoon didn't make it. My counterpart in the French relief force tells me that their platoon is missing. They haven't been able to find them, dead or alive, not even a trace."

Having seen enough from the document in his grasp, the King slid it back onto the table's finely polished surface. Pressing the ridge of his brow in a pinch, he groaned; "What's going on here, Captain? Why are men going missing up there, out of nowhere?" As he asked with a hunger to know, the King's eye glanced at the gruesome photograph — a mangled, disemboweled corpse atop

a surgeon's table. He hadn't seen anything like it, not even from the last war since passed. "I'm being told all sorts of guesses, and speculations about this incident from Ironside, and Poole, and what have you, but no definitive answers. We need answers, Captain. Not bloody speculation, as everyone seems so fascinated in! What happened to my men?"

The question, more demand, weighed heavy and burdensome on Captain Boswell's head. His desire for firm answers was just as unquenchable as George The Fifth's, yet like his King he was left without anything of the sorts, not even a morsel. "I wish I could provide you with an answer, Your Majesty," came Captain Boswell's regretful reply; "However we are also without an affirmative answer. From what I'm aware, nobody knows the cause."

No comfort was found in Boswell's words, the evidently concerned King not paying much mind to them, if any at all. His blue-irised gaze moved up from the depressing display of articles, and back towards the glum-faced lower officer. Just from looks alone the attentive Monarch could tell that this particular Captain had truly been in the thick of it; something about this whole foretold 'incident' was amiss. Faintly the King's face tensed up with riled feeling, and he said in all of his belief; "Usually, Captain, I am not one to convey my personal judgment before facts arise. However, I feel I am within my right to say that something evil is afoot. Not just in Russia, no, but within the entire continent. Entire nations and peoples are amidst all sorts of turmoil. Riots, war, famine, uncertainty, all happening at once, and not a single man, woman, or child can breathe through the smoke. Every part of the continent is in flames, and so is the rest of the world. Even here at home, in Dublin."

"N-No, Your Majesty, I agree." Captain Boswell tapped his service cap against his leg where it hung loosely in his grip. "The conditions have proven to be very difficult, we're not sure when they'll let up. We hope to God it's soon, for peace sake."

"Difficult," the King repeated back, honing in on the word with a light nod; "Yes, it truly has been, Captain. I cannot agree more with that sentiment." Slowly he began to pace around the table, running his fingers along the surface of it before drifting off as he sauntered sluggishly away. He stopped for a second and cleared his throat, gazing off into an unspecified spot in the room as though he was daydreaming; "Ahem… You know what else is difficult, Captain? When you have doubters around you, within your inner circle. Having men around you who are full of nothing but perpetual doubt, fears, and reservations, that it gravely hinders any meaningful progress." Having seemingly had enough with his momentary gaze into nothing, the King with a clearly troubled look on his face turned back to look at the still attentive Captain Boswell. "Stamfordham doubted," George of Great Britain stated regretfully; "Milne, Ironside, Lloyd George, they all doubted. And by God, they did it with great enthusiasm. … Nicholas could've been saved, Captain. Our doubts killed him. And now it's killing our men."

'Nicholas'. For seven months and counting, all talk of the situation in Russia always came back to one particular figure for the King and his Empire to the west. Any and all talk surrounding the east

for George of Windsor heavily emphasized that old blood relative, of which he was much bereaved over. Captain Boswell had heard whispers of his King's grief over it, but to see it manifested in real time was another experience altogether. "I'm sorry for the whole thing, Your Majesty," was Boswell's soft-spoken offer of condolences; "But I'm sure his family is safe, surely. The-the Bolshevist papers said so, they moved them to a safer location."

This in turn made the King pause, dead in his tracks. He served the serviceman of his army an incredulous, critical glance; "Do you really believe them, Captain," the King pressed, already knowing the answer.

The Captain was made to swallow his words — he didn't. Benefits of the doubt aside, there were just too many holes in this entire foreign conflict; even he knew this, as a lower British soldier. Boswell kept quiet, dropping any attempts to console the bereaved monarch with futile assumption. It wouldn't do either of them any good.

After a pause which grew uncomfortable for either of them, the King ushered the topic forward. This time, with a change from spectating to getting involved. "If I'm allowed to make a request to you, Captain, I'd like to make clear that I wish for this entire operation to bear fruit. We can't allow dithering any longer, I will also make this very clear to Ironside and Poole when I speak to them later today. I'm being firm now to avoid unpreparedness later, we cannot allow this operation to be in vain."

Captain Boswell nodded to this sentiment, wholeheartedly agreeing.

"Before you leave here today," the King continued; "You must assure me that you will fulfill two specific duties. One, you will continue to look after your men to the utmost of your ability. And two, find out what that beast killing our men is."

One of these requests sounded within the Captain's ability, the other not so much. Ensuring that the men under his command were safe was one certainly controllable thing, but investigating an unknown, clearly hostile entity? That was a whole, very dangerous, different thing altogether, and one that Boswell would've rejected without so much a thought if it was asked by anyone else. But this was His Majesty, the King, who had made his mind about the entire episode very clear. "That's a very risky order, Your Majesty," Captain Boswell swallowed; "But if it's what you order, then I shall carry it out. However possible."

A sort of reassured smile crept from underneath the King's beard, perhaps finding an inkling of optimism and hope in an overwhelming sea of grief and tribulation. "Good," His Majesty said

quietly; “Very good, Sir. I only expect the best of your ability, nothing more. Your men will be relieved too from what I’ve been told, by March.”

Nodding with a certain level of thankfulness for the King’s understanding, Captain Boswell stowed the task into the forefronts of his mind. Then, enter stage left at the last minute, a more pressing issue. His men were still freezing in Arkhangelsk, guarding posts which were quickly becoming death traps. Despite his sense of duty, Captain Boswell still believed that he needed his men out of there, and fast; allow fresher, far better equipped soldiers to take the place of their exhausted compatriots. For the moment he stowed it, mildly encouraged by the news that relief would be coming sooner than expected. But would they be able to hold on for that long? It was hard to say.

Topics of grief and hardship aside, the King once more covered his mouth to cough. “Anyhow, Captain,” he digressed swiftly, perhaps for his own sanity; “I also bring forth news to you. As I’m sure you know, I’ve been taking note of your service by ear of your compatriots. What I’m hearing is good news, even encouraging despite the odds. Because of what I’m being told, I’ve decided to consider you for a knighthood.”

At first the words didn’t quite impact Captain Boswell as much as it should, until finally it clicked in. He blinked in momentary disbelief; “…A Knighthood, Sir?”

“Your handling of this matter has impressed me,” the monarch commended; “Amidst all the uncertainty to which we face in Russia, you seem to be steering your men with great precision. On these grounds, I have deemed that a Knighthood is in order.”

Now Boswell’s own assessment of his handling didn’t quite match his King’s more optimistic view. In fact, he felt as though the whole thing was a downright mess partly caused by his own ineptitude. But despite his self-reservations, His Majesty’s word on Knighthoods or anything of the sort was usually final, and so accepted it with a certain degree of humbleness. In this, Captain Boswell remembered a passage from the good book which his town Vicar would often recite; something about exalting the humbled, and humbling the exalted. Personally he felt that the former applied the most to him.

Knok-Knok-Knok-Knok!! — Frantic knocks came in the direction of the doors, the rapid succession polite yet urgent. It was the King’s verbal permission to ‘come in’ which allowed the disturber to come through, the identity being the suit-dressed gentleman from earlier. He had a letter in his hands, folded neatly and ready to open. “Pardon me, Your Majesty,” the intruder duly excused himself as he marched in; “For Captain Boswell, Sir. It’s a telegram from Russia.”

Briefly the Captain paused to process the news, then received the letter before unfurling it in his hands. The message wasn't long, not at all, but the news it brang was enough of a shocking revelation to surprise him — Not only had they found the missing French platoon, at least what was left of them, they had also found two survivors. They were both coming to London.

"Is everything alright, Captain," the King inquired, once again awaiting an update.

"I-I'm not so sure, Your Majesty," Captain Boswell replied with caution and an abundance of uncertainty — much like his initial report.

February, 1919 — London. Encounter plus twenty-five days.

The ports of London were particularly crass in temperature that time of year, but something about this particular chill this time around felt different to the soon-to-be 'Sir' Boswell. His khaki greatcoat could only do so much to protect its wearer from the stabbing, chilly winds which blew every so often, cutting through the fabric to jab at his arms and chest. Dare he say it, the weary yet unshaken Captain Boswell swore that it was the same winter winds that he had faced in Arkhangelsk — perhaps Arkhangelsk had followed him home.

On the fog-choked Port of Tilbury Captain Boswell stood, alongside a handful of fellow British Servicemen; some higher in rank than himself, and the others below. They all waited patiently for the arrival of a ship from Arkhangelsk — a Royal Navy destroyer, the HMS Thunderclad. On board were a mixture of soldiers returning from the expeditionary force, Russian refugees escaping the civil war, and of most importance, the two remaining survivors of the missing French platoon. Why the French themselves wouldn't take their found compatriots was lost on Captain Boswell, as well as his fellow men in arms who stood alongside him.

"Blasted fog," the British Officer to the immediate left of Boswell grumbled, gawking right into the blinding gray; "It's not doing us any bloody favours, now is it?"

"Certainly isn't," Captain Boswell himself agreed in a dull hum, adjusting his black leather gloves which kept his hands relatively warm; "Let's just hope they can find their way, through all that."

“Aye, it’s been persisting for two days now,” the same Officer stated again, having given up looking through the wispy, swirling wall; “From what I hear, it’s so thick in the channel, it’s halting ocean liners.”

“They’ll get here,” another Officer this time to Boswell’s right interjected; “It’s just a matter of when. See I was with the Navy for a month or two, during the war. There’s been worse conditions than this, in the Biscay especially.”

“The Biscay is a holiday compared to the North Sea,” came forth Captain Boswell’s particularly blunt rebuke, blowing into the slits of his gloves to keep his hands warm; “You’ve never known fog unless you’ve been up that way. By God, my ship almost got lost heading down here a week ago. Might’ve damn well run aground if it wasn’t for the wind picking up.”

A half sort of scoff came from the ‘Biscay’ Naval Officer, sensing the pang of crassness that underlined William Boswell’s words. Whether he had noticed the scoff or not, the Captain didn’t heed much mind to it, his attention still focused on that hope that the ‘Thunderclad’ would be there soon. The ‘Thunderclad’ would survive, of course it would. It had to. But it was two hours late.

An impatient sort of sigh came from Boswell’s right, from the man of the service who had started this bout of conversation. “Right! This is getting tedious,” he remarked with no more patience to spare; “Don’t suppose she’s coming anytime soon. Perfect time for a cigar break?”

Standing amidst the half a dozen men at arms was a senior figure above them all. A clean-shaven, steely-faced Major to be exact, one who went by the name of ‘Longham’. Even he, this more senior ‘Major Longham’, admitted that the wait was going to be far longer than anticipated, after great reluctance to break their form. And so the gang of Officers moved away from where they stood, on the docks of that gloomy and damp port, and towards drier grounds which hosted a nearby small and tidy hostelry.

But one man didn’t move, even after much coaxing from his fellow men at arms. That man was Captain Boswell, now standing all alone in that dense silence, the afternoon surely metamorphosing into evening; not that it mattered much, it was already practically late evening with how dark it was. There was no way the sun was going to shine through all that horrific fog, the way that it swirled, and swallowed anything that dared defy it through light. It was just like Arkhangelsk, only without the tension and the threat of revolutionary gunfire, artillery or otherwise.

As much as he would’ve liked the company and for his compatriots to remain, Boswell didn’t mind the quiet; the absence of noise or any sort of commotion. It gave him ample opportunity to think,

properly this time — to reflect. This Captain hadn't seen much of the Great War, unlike the many other men in his position, only the latter half of it. Reims was quiet all things considered, with the bulk of the active fighting going on further to the east and west along the front. It was only until the Germans launched their ill-fated 'Spring Offensive' in nineteen-eighteen, did the city see anything major. The Western Front was a beast, that much Captain Boswell wholeheartedly believed — but if Reims was a beast, then Northern Russia was a demon. A big, powerful, overbearing demon of snow and fog. It stalked all who came from there.

A plume of exhaled breath blew out the lonely Captain's mouth in the cold as he shuffled towards the edge of the dock, the toe of his boots touching the lip of the port as he gazed down into the dark, murky water of The River Thames. It swirled and swelled gently, like the fog that hung lazily overhead, like the two natural elements were synchronized in some slow, ritualistic dance. Boswell wondered, passively, about what could possibly be below all of that water. The Underground? Long lost tunnels maybe? Perhaps bodies from the many men that have tried to invade merry old England, before the days of the United Kingdom? If The Thames had secrets, she was guarding them well.

"And what are you doing here?"

A feminine voice broke the silence that Boswell had submersed himself in, almost making him jump in surprise and into The Thames. He spun back around to see who had interrupted him, finding a woman standing before him, around the same spot where he had stood waiting for the 'Thunderclad'. She was a tall woman, almost unusually so, who had long, flowing blonde hair which draped like a fine curtain over the shoulders of her long, incredible black dress. Her eyes were of wonder, of color. Boswell couldn't quite describe it; there was nothing obviously unusual about them, but something about those eyes just boasted color, wonder, and intriguing splendor about their owner.

Gaining his composure post-haste, Captain Boswell spoke to the woman; "Can I help you, ma'am," he asked cautiously, wondering what exactly a woman was doing pottering about the almost deserted Port of Tilbury. It certainly was no place for a woman of her outward prestige, with her dress more fit for a ballroom than some damp, gloomy harbor.

Curiously the blonde woman only smiled, and shook her head graciously. "Oh no, not at all," she said in her whimsically smooth voice; "In fact, I was wondering if perhaps I could help you. What are you, a Captain of His Majesty's Army, doing all the way out here by yourself?"

"I'm afraid that's confidential, ma'am," Captain Boswell told her; "There's nothing I can tell you." He wondered exactly how she knew of his exact rank. Perhaps she was just that knowledgeable, having familiarized herself with uniforms. Still, it struck him as off.

To this secrecy the woman let off a pout, which then turned into a cheeky-looking half smirk which dimpled her right cheek. “Awe, come on now, Captain,” she said almost flirtatiously; “Don’t you know it’s terrible manners to keep secrets from a woman? What if I wish to know~?”

“That still wouldn’t sway me,” Boswell replied, stepping away from the port’s edge; “Again, you’re asking me for very confidential information that I cannot provide. Who are you anyway, being out here all alone in his harbour?”

An almost playful gasp came from the woman, who then tilted her hips to one side and let her mouth drop in “surprise.” She cooed; “That’s a mightily personal question to ask, good Sir! Why are you asking, did you perhaps want a taste of me?”

The Captain scrunched his nose, almost disgusted. “I have a wife, thank you very much,” was Boswell’s crass reply; “Afraid I’m not pursuing this conversation any longer, you’re going to have to—”

“Oh yes, darling Adriana! Of course! How could I have forgotten?”

Monumental was the shock that William Boswell experienced when he heard his wife’s name; Adriana Boswell, his wife of five faithful years. They had married a month before the start of the Great War, in an Anglican Church just south of York. Words failed Captain Boswell as he stood there, glaring at the women in his moment of suspense. “That’s her… How in God’s name do you know that,” he finally pressed sternly, beginning to wonder if this was a set-up.

“I know a great many things, Captain,” the blonde woman sashayed her hips, stepping with a gracious strut towards the Officer with a wide mischievous smirk; “A great, many things. Why, I could tell you everything you ever, *ever,* wanted to know right here, right this exact minute if I wanted to! You should know now that I’m a very powerful woman, make no mistake about that.”

“That sounds awfully like a threat, ma’am,” Captain Boswell earnestly warned, his suspicions of her which only started off small having now grown. “That can get you arrested, I assure you. Whatever game you’re playing, it won’t end well for you.”

Tittering laughter erupted from the woman, giggling away like she had just been told something hilarious. “And let me assure *you,* you tall specimen of a fine gentleman,” she swiped back with a

tease, playfully twirling her finger around in a circle towards the man; “Whatever authority you think you have over me, believe me, you don’t. I’m afraid I’m far too powerful for a mere man like yourself!”

In all of his fatigue over the past month, Captain Boswell was going to have none of this. “Who do you think you are,” he snapped back in return, still holding onto his professional self-disciplinary control as he stepped further towards the growingly obnoxious girl.

Whether it was mere theatrics or not, the blonde woman paused and took a moment to seriously consider the question, tapping her finger in thought against her smooth, petite chin. Her eyes gazed up into the sky and she hummed in thought, before then providing her answer; “An overseer, of sorts,” she finally replied, her smirk turning into a wide, toothy grin; “But that’s not what I think, silly! That’s what I know~”

This was the final straw for Boswell; “Right! I’ve had enough of your riddles, woman! Myself and my colleagues are on official business here, and I will not stand by and have you jab your nose into this. Now please, leave!”

Only further ‘mockery’ came the fed-up Captain’s way; like a disapproving mother the woman tut-tutted and shook her head, both hands splayed out on either side of her hips. “You just don’t get it, do you,” she flatly asked, the playfulness in her tone faded; “Pity, I thought you were smarter than this.” In one smooth, continuous motion she stepped forward and sashayed her hips from side to side, stopping when she was no more than an uncomfortable foot away. Only then was Boswell able to appreciate the woman’s unusual height. “Let me tell you something,” she uttered in an almost sultry whisper; “That little boat of yours? She will be here soon, don’t you worry about that my little friend. But I assure you, what you will find will be nothing like you’ve ever imagined possible. Keep an open mind, if you will.” Thus having spoken her piece, she found it fit to turn away, and with a gracious saunter she began to leave.

But Boswell had questions, ample questions, all that begged to be answered all at one. One of which, he had the courage to bellow out; “Who are you?!”

Surprisingly this made the woman stop, just before she could vanish out of sight into the dense wall of fog. It was like she had paused in time, with one foot off the ground and an unsettlingly steady center of balance. “Legion,” she called back out in a calm voice, then at once herself and her black dress disappeared into the oppressive gray wall.

The lone witness to the mysterious woman of impressive knowledge was left without words. His mind on her too failed him; who was she? But he didn't have much to think about this, as from the fog shrouding the water, a dark, gigantic silhouette began to appear, piercing through the fog in a slow, watery glide. The HMS Thunderclad had arrived. Immediately Captain Boswell snapped back to his senses, getting back into his position as the destroyer, aided by two tugboats blaring their whistles, drifted up portside. In what felt like no time at all, the Port of Tilbury was littered with dockmen, tethering and boarding the anchored ship, and weary soldiers began to greet dry land.

Taking the initiative to get to the bottom of Arkhangelsk's horrific mystery, Captain Boswell boarded the ship, brushing past departing riflemen in their woolen khaki uniforms. He began asking around, trying to find someone, anyone, who knew about the two French soldiers due to arrive. It didn't take long for him to find what he sought after, finding a small group of servicemen closely escorting a blanketed man off the destroyer, towards the stern.

Boswell strided in a quick march to the group, and the fellow Captain that was with the escort party took quick notice of the arrival. To an abrupt halt Boswell stopped, immediately saluting the rank of his fellow man; "Sir! Captain Boswell," he recited his name breathlessly.

"Captain Armstrong," the bare-faced Captain greeted back with his own salute, though looked confused; "I thought you were instructed to stand by on port."

"Yes I was, I apologise," Boswell acknowledged with a wide nod. He turned his attention to the blanketed Frenchman, his wide-eyed expression blank yet positively crazed — He looked exhausted, extremely so, the bags of his eyes giving him a ghoulishly gaunt appearance like he had been to hell and back. Boswell hadn't seen anything like it. "There's supposed to be two of them. That's only one, where's the other?"

Profound was the lack of response from the small, khaki-clad group of four, an obvious hesitance having cast an apparent deep spell over them. Only one man, a young oval-faced Private, had the courage to reveal what had happened; "He jumped on the way here, Sir. I-Into the North Sea. We couldn't find him."

Again words failed Captain Boswell, examining the heavily disorientated Frenchman who if he hadn't been awake would've very likely presumed to be dead. Even now standing he looked nothing more than a wax figure, the sheer lack of life presenting him like a mindless walking corpse. Something caught Captain Boswell's attention, a small string of words etched along the length of the Frenchman's arm in black ink, written over and over:

“Yeux de couleur.

Yeux de couleur.

Yeux de couleur.

Yeux de couleur.

Yeux de couleur.

Yeux de couleur.

Yeux de couleur.

Yeux de couleur. ”

The Ugly

In a Wrath town's old rustic saloon, in a particularly smoky corner of the bar where clean air didn't exist, around a worn wooden gambling table, sat a group of four; three imps with varying facial hairstyles, and a hellhound. Their regular, friendly afternoon game of poker had progressed into the hour, the bottles of whiskey and flavored cigars enough for them to keep going; so did the pangs of conversation that each of them took turns in whipping up. They were regulars to this particular bar in town, at this point having become a guaranteed sight to any visitor over the years. If the bar could afford it, their seats would have their names printed in gold on the wooden backrests. Regardless of name or not, nobody sat at this table except for them — and the fifth less frequent member, who as usual seemed to be missing.

"'Ey! Have you fellers heard," the beer-gutted imp of the group who sported a scraggly white beard asked passively, as he laid down the first card of the round; "Joe's daughter came back a couple days ago, see, from Pride!"

"Err… can't say I have, naw," the tall and bulky hellhound who wore a ten-gallon hat, plumes of cigar smoke trailing out through his nostrils; "Say, Joe's the hog farmer, right? O-On the outskirts of town?"

"Yep! That's him alright," the bearded imp wheezed, leaning forward in his chair; "Apparently his daughter quit her job. Heard she finally decided 'twas best to, yanno, come back home. Nothin' left for her in the big city, 'cept for that job. See that's dead as a drunkard in the water now, so she packed and left."

"Pah! Probably got tired of that shitty ol' place," the lanky old imp of the gambling party chuckled, his face peppered with white sun spots and wrinkles from age; "All the goddamn noise that happens that-a way, 's enough to make anyone go insane! If ya ask me, it's better for her that she came back! Probably the best decision of her life. I'm telling ya from now, fellas, I knew this was comin'! I told ya's from day one! Ever since she married that wimpy Greed boy, a-comin' down that aisle together, she's been in nothin' but trouble."

"Hmph…" the instigator of the current conversation grunted, shrugging his shoulders with indifference; "Got involved with the wrong man, that's what it sounds like. Who does that anyway, run away from their home with a son-uva-bitch from Greed? We have enough money launderin' problems from that pot-belly Mammon and his drug money rings, and she wants to get involved with one of 'em? Foolish, damn foolish!"

“The Lord of Greed,” the hellhound said mockingly, then spat on the floor at the title and name; “Ptoo! Hm! Bastard… He’s nothin’ but a big, green, gob of cowshit…” His sleepy-looking gaze drifted away from his group of fellow cowpokes and towards the empty chair across from him. “Say, when’s that sun-uva-gun comin’ anyway?”

“Oh he’ll come. In his own good time,” the third and final rough-voiced imp assured calmly, preening the ends of his white twirled mustache with the tips of his weathered fingers. Chewing tobacco smeared the corners of his lips as he packed in another fingerful from his jar full of the stuff.

“Well gadungit, he’s always late,” the bristly bearded imp groaned, rolling his eyes; “The one day ‘snake-eyes’ promises to come ‘round on time, and he ain’t even here yet! ‘S like he ain’t a man of his word, nothin’ but bluster n’ smoke.”

With this remark the tension in the room grew suddenly, everyone else around the table shifting uncomfortably in their seats. “Oohh, I’d be careful with sayin’ that,” the hellhound warned in a fair whisper, and he glanced around the room out of caution; “Don’t reckon he’d take too kindly to that sorta speak.”

The severity of what he had said dawned on the gambler just like that, his eyes widening in a bout of fear. “N-No, I know that Lionel, I know,” assured the imp in a reciprocated whisper; “But I’m just sayin’, it’d be nice if he was on time every once in a while. Shoot, can’t keep the seat reserved forever, yanno?”

“Well if we value our fucken necks, we need to,” ‘Lionel’ murmured back, leaning back away from the imp and into the backrest of his chair. Huffing through pursed lips he looked over his cards and the three revealed ones splayed on the table, grumbling when he realized his prospects of winning this round weren’t all that good. “Goddammit,” the hound muttered in a heavy drawl, pouring himself another shot of whiskey. Downing the umpteenth shot of grog that afternoon in one generous swig, he gasped and said; “Gah— Yanno what I’ve been seein’ recently? In Pride, whenevuh I go in, I keep seein’ them Kraut sinners wonderin’ about. They’re everywhere now! Swear it’s gotten worse ovuh the past few months, comin’ in the place like buzzards to a corpse!”

“Pride’s nothin’ *but* a corpse,” the twirled-mustache imp snickered with a whistle between his crooked teeth, chewing tobacco smeared in flakes across his gums. “When’ve ya heard anythin’ good come outta Pride, Lionel? Surely ya’d know, ya’ve been ‘round longer than any of us, bein’ a hellhound and all.” It was when the shabby-haired ‘Lionel’ paused and dithered trying to think of anything at all that the imp’s crooked grin grew wider. He cackled; “Exactly, see? Nothin’! The sooner we accept that Pride’s nothin’ but no good, the better.”

A raised eyebrow from the hellhound came the cowpoke's way, giving him a disbelieving glance; "Are we any better, Kenny? Really?"

The mustached gambler blinked and tilted his head; "What? 'Course we are, Lionel, we're not Pride!"

"No, there's that," the large wolf-man conceded; "But we also got a drunken gunfight out in the street here every Tuesday! Not to mention the abundance of outlaws runnin' about." The hound gestured to the still empty seat; "Shoot, no-show over there's one himself!"

"I was one! I was," the bushy-bearded imp almost boasted, raising his hand up like he was in a classroom; "'Twas only briefly for stealin' liquor from the bar, but hey that counts!"

The hellhound scoffed; "No it damn well don't, Lee, you were drunk at the time and you forgot to pay! That don't mean shit. Heh. But see, my pappy on the other hand—"

"Ohh, here we go…"

"Arrghh…"

"You and your pappy, Lionel!"

A broad grin had spread across 'Lionel's' bushy brown maw, his replacement gold fangs glimmering in the orange glow of the oil light above. However his grin faded when something through the saloon's window caught his eye. It was a large flaming horse trotting graciously down the street, its cloaked rider slowing the stallion down before guiding it gently to the hitching posts just beyond the outside deck. Immediately he knew who it was; *"Shit, that's bombproof..."* the hellhound muttered almost fearfully, before turning to his gambling mates; "Shh-shh, hey! He's come, boys! He's finally arrived!"

The gamblers knew who 'he' was, and quickly stifled their moment of banter. All eyes staring through the window were fixated obsessively on the cloaked rider, who hitched his massive horse before stepping onto the saloon's creaky deck. In a stride the cloaked figure with his black, wide-brimmed hat sauntered into the saloon as his scarred tail flicked moodily, pushing the doors wide open before making headways to his seat at the gambling table. He didn't speak as he sat down, and neither did the rest of the regulars who didn't dare to.

After a phlegm-plagued snort, the figure tilted his head upwards and glared at everyone with his remaining good golden eye — the other had been scarred in a burns-related accident, and in its place was an eyepatch. His face was different, a gruesome overwhelming burn scar blemishing the eyepatched side of his face, like the sun itself had given him a big, wet smooch. He didn't like talking about it. "Mind if I get a drink, fellers," the rattlesnake asked in a raspy sort of tone.

"Ye-Yeah, sure," 'Lee' obliged, and with a swift hand poured the new arrival a drink. The gunslinger watched plainly, his serving of liquor being served to him in a fleeting, fickle sort of drizzle. "So, uh, Striker… how ya been holdin' up, old pal?"

Striker scrunched his nose and shrugged, first sipping his shot of premium whiskey before uttering; "Gettin' there, Lee. I'm gettin' there, as always." He swirled the contents of the short, carated glass by the tips of his fingers, looking down into the rich gold liquid. "What say you, ol' timer? Still in the mines, or ya moved on?"

"Oh naw, I've long since retired," the bearded imp nervously chuckled; "N-Nothin' left in these tired, old muscles of mine!"

The remark didn't humor Striker who merely stared like he was expecting something else. When that failed to be realized, he got back to drinking, giving each one of his gambling friends a studying glance from behind the gleaming carated glass. After licking his quenched lips, the badly scarred outlaw cocked his head down and hoarsely said; "Hot damn, that stuff's good. Best liquor I've had in a while, 's like aloe vera to a welt. What's this stuff, Lionel? Seems like somethin' ya'd choose."

"Yup, that was me. It's, uh.. it's Hellfire Vintage," the hatted hellhound replied as he glanced at the bottle's label, having bought it no more than ten minutes ago. "Bought it for all of us, had you in mind."

A sharp-tooth smile cut across Striker's scarred snout, his finely trimmed mustache upturning; "Now ain't that just thoughtful. Appreciate it, old friend, I really do. Better than the cheap shit, that's for true. Ain't that right, fellas?" The table nodded in near complete unison, like the serpent was the ringmaster above them all. Wiping his scrunched nose, Striker drove the talk along; "So what's the gossip, boys? Anythin' new since I've been gone?"

“Can’t say there’s much, no,” ‘Kenny’ took his chance to speak, still chewing on his tobacco; “There’s the whole thing with Joe’s daughter comin’ back from Pride, but that’s about it.”

If ‘Kenny’ had expected Striker to immediately respond with something to this, his expectations were left unsatisfied. Instead he noticed that the rattlesnake across from him had fallen deathly silent, and seemed to have abstained from any movement at all. Everyone at the table grew weary of this, and subconsciously braced themselves for whatever was to come. Finally, Striker growled; “…Ya mean Millie.”

“Yeah! Ye-Yeah, that’s her name. Why, how didja…”

“Word travels fast ‘round here, my friend,” the gunslinger uttered with a toothy chuckle, proceeding to light himself a spare cigar in the process; “Been hearin’ about it in whispers and casual conversation. Hahah.. Ain’t nothin’ gets too far past me, no Sir. In fact… seemin’ that she’s back here, at home, suppose I’ve been thinkin’ of paying her a visit.”

Quiet chatter rumbled at the table between the other four. But once again it was only Lionel who had the courage to ask, his low gravelly voice enough to match Striker’s own; “A visit, what for?”

“That I ain’t decided yet,” Striker admitted and took another swig of his glass, rocking back in his chair to kick his feet up like he owned the place; “An apology, maybe? Make amends after the hostilities ‘gainst her pretty little self. Who knows, maybe we could become cordial after all this time.” Suddenly Striker’s jaw went slack and he paused, a thought having crossed his mind in a fleeting moment. “Ya wanna know somethin’, boys? That husband of hers, that Greed boy, ‘Moxxie’… I wouldn’t doubt that he’s the very damn reason that dear Millie has come home. Makes too much sense for it *not* to be the reason.”

“See that’s what I’m sayin’,” Kenny enthusiastically piped up, glad that someone agreed with him; “We-We were just sayin’ the exact same thing! Everyone knows that Greed and Wrath don’t mix, it’s a simple fact!”

“That it damn well is,” Striker agreed in a low, growling drawl, his good eye growing hazy as he stared off into space. It twitched with an underlying, unannounced disdain for the subject of the topic, akin to the look of someone hungering for revenge. Letting out a throaty exhale, Striker sat back upright in his chair and uttered to everyone who’d listen; “See that little fucker, Moxxie? That no-good son-uva-whore keeps gettin’ the better of me. Don't like admittin’ it, but he is. Seems to hang around that one goetia prince like a fly to cowshit, keeps gettin’ in my way. But no more! Sick to death of it… Now that Greed boy’s gonna know what failure daggum feels like, and by Wrath

am I gonna get at him. Any objections?" When no objections came his way, as expected, Striker grinned louder; "Good. Damn good. Knew y'all's had my back, from day one. Always knew it!"

"Naw, of course," Lionel spoke once again, his baritone vocals the most prominent of them all, even above Striker's that sounded diminutive in comparison. If nobody knew any better, a bystander would've claimed wholeheartedly that the tall, ten-gallon-sporting hellhound was the ringleader amongst his 'lesser' fellow gamblers. "But I gotta ask, Strikes. That Moxxie's a damn good shot, I've seen him in action one or two times. How in hell are you gonna overcome him, you got a plan?"

"Oh I got a plan, Lionel," the rattlesnake said with a plotting, conniving smirk; "Ya just need to have faith. That goes for all of ya here, ya just need to have some faith."

And faith they all had. Yes, indeed, they all had faith, whether by their own free choice or not. Striker didn't take kindly to objections or doubts either way, at least to an overwhelming extent with few compromises. This band of tired, aging men had taken to Striker's liking, giving them leeway to a great number of things that he didn't give to anyone much else. One of these things, amongst others, were doubts and questions.

With all said and done, Striker joined this band of social smokers and eager drinkers in their game of poker, a hand of face-down cards reserved just for him. The game proceeded as normal with the extra head, another set of eyes — more rather, 'eye' — studying the third revealed card in the line; a six of diamonds. The rattlesnake shifted his gaze down at his own hand, smirking conservatively when he noticed that he might have this in the bag. The second-last card was revealed, then the final — Striker had just won twelve whole dollars.

"Well I'll be damned," Striker chuckled with a hiss, bringing in the chips as the spoils. "Who thinks we raise the stakes, huh? Anyone brave enough?"

"Sure," the imp known as 'Lee' nodded; "But with what?"

The outlaw paused to think, rattling his fingers against the table. Then came his idea; "Maybe with somethin' a lil'… unorthodox." Reaching into his pocket, Striker pulled out what struck his fellow men as nothing short of surprising; a bright silver, gold-etched, long-barrel revolver, rifled too and with the most expensive sights on the market. Not only that, but the weapon had also been blessed, the signature of the manufacturer engraved into the varnished wood grip; ***"~Carmilla~"***

“Holy shit…” Lionel gaped in awe, instantly fixating on the awe-capturing exhibit like a moth to light. He knew exactly what it was, being a gun expert himself; a limited edition run of ‘Carmilla’ brand blessed weapons, only one in two-hundred-and-fifty of its kind. It was here, right in front of the hellhound’s face, taunting him. “How in the… Who the— How the hell didja get this??”

“Stole it, after shootin’ a man,” the conniving rattlesnake grinned; “He tried to rob me, so I robbed him.“

“Damn,” blinked Lionel, still honed in on the diamond in the rough; “That’s a bit brutal, dontcha think?”

Of course, Striker didn't think so. “Dog eat dog world, my ol’ friend,” he said in an almost dismissive fashion, going back to his initial offer; “Anyhow, ‘nuff talk! What say you, boys? Man who wins the next game, also wins this shiny ol’ thing.”

It took a little bit for everyone to make up their minds, but eventually the prospect of walking home with a rare and shiny shooting iron was enough to win them all over — it certainly had won over Lionel. The game was on. Five dollars each in chips the gamblers put down, except for Striker who had gone the extra mile to throw in not six, seven, or eight, but ten whole dollars into the pot. The winning cards were splayed out face-down, everyone’s hands full with their new cards, and the million-dollar round began.

“Say, Strikes,” Lionel called across the table, the beholder of the name glancing over from his hand; “Ya sure you’re good givin’ this away like that? These are a rarity, man, a rarity! I mean c’mon, a limited edition colt signed by Carmilla herself? You’re a rich man with it!”

“Too late to back down now,” Striker huffed as he reviewed his cards over and over, comparing them to the five cards on the table being revealed one by one. This battle-scarred gunslinger was rich, but for how long would he be so? His luck began to show signs of straining by the time the second card had been revealed, a grimace growing across Striker’s snout. “Argh, hell…” he muttered mournfully to himself, watching his ownership of the rarity slip out of his hands. The window to victory narrowed, the path getting smaller and smaller as the highly generous spoils shifted in Kenny the imp’s favor — the white-bearded gambler had won.

“Gahh! Sunnuva bitch,” Striker blurted out in defeat. Kenny claimed his prize with the greediest grin known to impkind, chuckling as he felt the weight of the silver and gold revolver in his hands. “Argh, goddammit… Enjoy it, Kenny. Ya’ve earned her fair and square,” the defeated, eyepatched serpent conceded reluctantly, sad to see the shooting iron slip from his ownership. In his moment of

defeat, Striker developed the urge to call it quits, his appetite for gambling having just dissipated. He leaned over to Lionel who was getting over his own loss; “Ey, Leo. What say you ride with me?”

The hellhound blinked; “Ride with you? You’ve only been here a whole five minutes, what you talkin’ bout?”

“Do ya wanna ride with me, yes or no,” Striker asked again, sounding more demanding this time around.

The sudden change in mood from the scarred serpent caught the hound by surprise. Something about the look in his remaining eye persuaded him to answer in Striker’s favor; “Uh… Yeah, sure. Just after we say our farewells, can’t leave the boys behind like all that.”

“Naw, true,” Striker huffed, leaning back in his chair. He took yet another shot of whiskey, savoring the bitter yet velvety flavor.

Wrath’s vast wilderness was especially lonely as the day marched sluggishly onwards, the distance decorated lavishly by jagged cliffs and hills that cut sharply upwards into the orange and violet sky. A lone reaper vulture native to Wrath feasted on the bloated corpse of an imp, tearing at the unfortunate man’s eyes and cheeks, grinding them down with its formidable rows of sharp black teeth. Rearing its head up from its meal, it suddenly took startled flight as two riders on their horses galloped by, paying no mind to the unknown corpse by the trailside as dust settled upon him.

“Again! Where are you takin’ us,” Lionel hollered out for the second time that ride, his ten-gallon flapping in the wind as he kept pace beside the determined rattlesnake. His flaming horse, a strong stallion called ‘Hortensia’, kept great pace beside ‘Bombproof’ who was just noticeably shorter by comparison.

“Hold ya horses, Leo! I said I’ll tell ya when we get there,” Striker piped up above the sound of thunderous galloping, noticing the sign that they had just passed that read “Razorback Gully.” He was almost home. “See? We’re almost there! Just a lil’ further up that hill this-a way.”

Lionel looked ahead and saw the hill fast approaching, noticing a run-down fence at the crest of the summit, the posts in an obvious state of disrepair even from afar. The hound rider honed in his gaze at it even as he and Striker began ascending up the hill, slowing their horses down to make the climb that bit less tiresome. The further they climbed, the more Lionel noticed the solemn look on Striker's face; it didn't suit him at all, and felt wholly alien to see him with that sort of look. For a fleeting second Lionel thought of pointing it out, but ultimately abstained — he felt all would be told very soon.

Sure enough they made it to the top of the hill, ending their half-hours-long ride. Striker slid off his horse and so did Lionel, the pair of them trudging in tandem up to the fenceline. Beyond the dilapidated timber fence, at the base of the hill below was a farmhouse; a worn and rundown looking one, accompanied by a small ramshackle barn to its right, the timber roof having long since caved in on itself ages ago. It looked like a lonely old place, away from any sort of civilization, in the vast Wrath wilderness. What a wonder it would be to lose yourself out there in that wilderness, with nothing but a roof over your head and the company of yourself — this is what Lionel thought as he watched the stagnant house, devoid of any and all life.

As he watched it, the hellhound leant onto the fence next to Striker, who too was gazing down at the unsuspecting old place. Still his burn-afflicted face with all of its scar marks look contorted with solemn thought. Just as Lionel was about to speak, Striker interrupted him; "Did I ever tell you I grew up here," he muttered to his one-man company.

"Can't say you have," Lionel responded truthfully.

"No. … No I haven't, have I," Striker again muttered, and with one gentle move of his hand wiped beneath his nose. He looked wholly pensive which struck Lionel as odd, having never seen this side to the outlaw before. Before too long, Striker spoke up; "Grew up here with my half brother, see. The memories we made, Leo, they're all in them rooms down there in that house. They haven't been touched since."

"Your half brother," was Lionel's impromptu question, the revelation that Striker wasn't an only child being news to him.

"Oh, right. Naw, can't say I told you 'bout that one, either," Striker smirked for a moment, which disappeared as quick as it emerged. He continued to stare intensely at the old farmhouse down below, the internal machinations of his mind must've been running overtime with how much raw nostalgia seemed to seep through his serpent's pupil. "He raised me on this here farm. See I never knew my momma or papa, if I ever had one. Who knows, maybe I just fell from the sky. He told me I turned up on that there porch, a random baby in a small wooden crate with a note that said who I was to him. He hated the responsibility, but still he took care o' me. Sixteen years I lived

here, ‘twas the only sorta stability I’ve ever known.” Just as this segment of monologue seemed to end, Striker’s face went as stiff as a board as if he was holding back a barely containable anger. “Then they came.”

“Who, who came?”

The second question in less than a minute seemed to have an adverse effect on Striker, his posture visibly tensing up as he leant on the railing. To those who knew him, this was usually the prelude to him acting out, giving cause for Lionel to question whether this old friend of his was about to lash out. Luckily the inevitable didn’t come, the rattlesnake’s stiff, angry posture dissipating back to his original state. “Greed manifested,” Striker sniffed, exhaling heavily through his reptilian snout. He continued with a laborious breath; “Yanno how we’ve had that problem with Greed folks comin’ ‘round here, throwin’ their weight around? Bein’ in places they ain’t have no business bein’ in? Well it weren't no different back then, no Sir. See I was down there near the entrance gates, was doin’ somethin’ or rather, I can’t remember. Suddenly I hear my brother, just hollerin’ my name like there was no tomorrow; *“Striker! Get your ass back here, fast!”* First I didn’t know what he was yappin’ about, but as soon as I turn ‘round, I noticed this black car a-comin’ down the dirt path that-a way. It stops just in front of the gates, and out steps the goddamn Mafia.”

“They start askin’ me if my brother was home, but I already took off runnin’ back to the house. Soon as I get back, the brother pulls me aside and tells me to get outta there — get as much as I can, and run for the hills, he’d catch up with me. Now I didn’t question him, did exactly what he said. Couldn’t even grab that much, just a handful of shit and I bolted out the back door. And I ended up here, where we’re standin’. Now there was a tree here back then, that’s obviously been cut down. So I waited there, by Wrath did I wait, waitin’ for my only sense of family to come up. … He never did. You know what I did see? The pack leader, a little red imp dressed in his pinstripe suit. Later found out that was the Cognome Family.” With a slow hand Striker gingerly pulled out a cigarette and match, striking the phosphoric tip against the decrepit fence which set it alight. The cigarette perched between his lips smoldered when the match was put to it.

The story was a lot for Lionel to take in. He naturally had questions, too many to ask all at once. One he did blurt out was the most pressing; “Wh-What were they wantin’ with ya’s? Normally Mafia boys don’t come ‘round unless they have a reason.”

Striker waved his hand at this in the middle of inhaling his first draw, coughing as he blew out the smoke; “Not the Cognomes, they don’t. They do it for sport. I’ve seen it myself, they got no goddamn sense of honor! Dunno why they see killin’ that way, but it don’t matter, they just do. Out of everyone I’ve ever come across, they’re the most evil sons-o’-bitches of ‘em all. And trust me, I’ve met some evil people. And Moxxie, being the son of ‘em… well I’m sure he’s no different.”

Suddenly the point in being brought out here started to make sense to Lionel; “This about that Moxxie, is it?”

“Damn right, it is,” Striker hissed, taking another drag of his freshly-lit cigarette; “Ya wanna know a secret ‘bout him? He killed his own mother, with his old man. Yessir. They took her out to the bayous there in Greed, and dumped her in. Talk of the entire town, has been for a while, but it’s been kept under wraps. … What son does that to their own mother?”

“So what’s this gotta do with Joe’s daughter,” again Lionel pressed in all due respect; “You were talkin’ ‘bout meetin’ her earlier.”

“I wanna save her, Leo,” Striker asserted, coughing a bit from the burning tobacco wisps; “Now that somethin’s gone wrong in their marriage, I’m more than willin’ to bet that that little Greed psychopath’s gonna murder her. It’s in his blood, not that he can help it — instinct. Now I can’t let that happen, no Sir. Not as long as I’m breathin’. Mark my words, Leo, I *will* break the Cognome’s game of murder and run. And if I don’t, I’ll sure as hell die tryin’.” With a stiff, shaking hand, Striker pointed down at the farmhouse, his jabbing finger leaving no doubt to where he was gesturing; “That house is a tomb. My brother’s still in there, that’s his coffin. His tomb. Call me a coward, but I don’t dare set foot in there, even after all these years. That tomb down there is a reminder to me, what I’ve lost. Greed took that from me.”

Hearing all this Lionel let out a deep breath, gawking down at the now foreboding property now that he knew the story — Wrath had many secrets, and she kept them well hidden. Striker hoisted himself up from the decaying old fence and patted Lionel on the back, signaling to him that he wanted to leave. Lionel followed, but just as he saddled back up on his horse, he thought he saw something in one of the dark windows of the abandoned farmhouse. The hellhound blinked, and shrugged whatever he had seen off as he steered ‘Hortensia’ away, galloping off behind Striker and his own faithful horse.

As the riders galloped back off to town, Lionel swore that he saw a silhouette in the house. It was watching them.

Some Sunny Day

The Queen of Gluttony's meditation chamber was like the resting Queen who resided in perfect stillness within it — quiet, restful, isolated… lonely. It was dark within the chamber as she levitated, hovering without motion in the air with impressive, impossible precision, letting herself drift into the inner reaches of her own mind in a shut-off state. Her eyes were closed gently and without strain, her arms and legs crossed over one another like she was within an invisible oval cocoon, her insect wings also in the same docile state with the numbing bliss of rest.

In all actuality Beelzebub didn't use the meditation chamber often, far more often than not seeing no use for it. This time around was different — this time around, she was dealing with a very special internal beast which arose on the rarest occasion. It threatened to drive her mad if she didn't entertain it at least once; such was the purpose of this out of the ordinary meditation session. The demand from Bee's internal self was a simple one; remember. She wanted, perhaps more needed, to remember. And so remember the lonely Queen did.

The memory she witnessed was vivid, scarily so, like she was right back in the moment in that long since departed present. Clear as day it all was, so much so that Bee herself could again feel that long-forgotten warmth. In this memory there was light, but not like the light of the day, but an ever-lasting light that isn't restricted by the concept of a day. This light had never known darkness, nor did it know sunset, as there was no darkness of the twilight hours to speak of in that realm. No afternoon, evening, or night — just constant, tireless light. Not only was there endless light, but there was the world's most beautiful atmosphere, breathable and peaceful in all of its splendor. It knew of no cold or heat, as it was just right. Somewhere in the very near distance was a little narrow river, its water flowing gracefully in a steady hypnotic stream, its banks plentiful with soft, damp grass populated with small colorful flowers. In it were little fish, swimming upstream with ease in little organized groups in flawless unison, as was their instinct. Blessing the little river with its plentiful shade was a large tree, tall and healthy with some of the most spectacular leafy growths ever known. They were so spectacular, that the witness to it could swear that humanity could never fully comprehend it — splendor and flawless majesty manifested.

All of this — the grass, the water, the tree, the surroundings — all of it is what the lonely Queen desired. However, there was one daunting difference to this memory, one that Beelzebub couldn't ignore for the life of her; she wasn't herself. Not that she didn't recognize herself, more rather she was in a form that she had long-since abandoned centuries ago. She was as she was, before the fall — before it all had even begun. Things like this, these memories, kept Bee grounded from time to time when she sorely needed them, her active photographic memory spanning centuries allowing herself to escape to something different. She loved Gluttony, of course she did, but even with the things you love, on the odd occasion there's a need to escape from them. Beelzebub was no different, not at all.

In a shuffling saunter the Queen found herself heading towards the small river, seating herself on the crust of the enriched banks where the grass was soft and naturally cushioned. Her dress of white and gold folded in on itself, bunching up around her crossed legs in all sorts of creases, and her pale feet rested in the grass. Bee planted her hands into the rich earth, curling the tips of her fingers into the dewy grass which sparkled in the eternal light. This was her favorite spot in the never-ending domain she had once called home, and it felt good to be back amongst it all, even if she wasn't really.

"Better to rule in… in… better to—to rule in… Better to… Better…" — the Queen couldn't bring herself to think it. Was it really?

Shaking her mind from the disrupting sentence, Bee looked down into the stream beyond the bank. She saw it flow with unimaginable grace, occasionally seeing small fish passing by in the opposite direction of the flow, swimming to their little heart's content. Bee loved fish; the way they looked, lived, and functioned. It was one of her favorite animals, next to birds that were the exact opposite. She found them funny. Thinking about it, Bee had always liked the look of Angelfish, the sort of fish you'd find in tropical reefs, and looked just as beautiful as the places they lived. She had always floated the idea of owning one, maybe dozens, with their own little especially created habitat.

In bliss and peace Bee looked into the stream, until her own voice, in the form of an apparition in her head, interrupted her. ***"You're not really here, are you,"*** it said to her; ***"You're not really here. It's impossible."***

"Just a few more minutes. I'll go soon," Bee told herself, not wanting to leave just yet. She didn't want to leave at all.

"What's there to leave from? You're not really here," her head again said, bringing the point home; ***"You're not really there. You made your choice a long, long time ago. … Your name's not "B-=_-^=e" anymore. Are you even the same person anymore? Do you remember that name, who you were?"***

"Very well," Bee muttered, trying to ignore herself as best she could. It wasn't going well, not at all.

"Poor little B^%=_~-e… what a mess you've found yourself in. That's been the story of your life for the past seventy-five thousand years. It's tiresome. … Was it all worth it? All for a throne?"

The Queen of Gluttony didn't have an answer. She grabbed a nearby stick that was long enough, and poked gently at the water, letting the delicate current of the running stream brush around the makeshift staff. Her brown-feathered wings ruffled a little, and she shivered, trying her hardest to keep her cool.

"If I lived regretting all the time," Bee told herself; "Then I'd have been nothing at all. A slice of humanity worshiped me, some time all those years ago. That's an achievement within itself."

"Did it feel good," her inner voice inquired.

"…Yeah," Bee replied quietly, still poking the stream; "Yeah, I suppose it did. People in their droves came to worship me, before effigies of me. They feared me, and I liked that. But I wanted more. I still want more. … Then a people came from Egypt. North they went, and they decimated my foothold. … Sometimes I want it back."

"But it's not that easy."

"Nothing is," the isolated Queen uttered in a deep sigh, taking the business end of the long stick out of the water. The image of the submerged stick reminded her of someone, belonging to those very same people she had spoken of, but she didn't care to remember the name. She didn't like to. Finally Bee huffed, it was her turn to query; "What do I want from myself?"

"To wake up," her voice whispered; ***"To wake up and face reality. You're not really here, B€=_}!-e… wake up to yourself. Smell the ashes, B^>>-=\e. Smell the ashes."***

****THNK! — THNK! — THNK!****

Finally Bee woke up, snapping out of her hypnotic meditative state, the sound of the doors to the meditation chamber being knocked by a firm hand. The Queen of Gluttony groaned, trying her hardest to shake herself out from the partial bodily slumber, before gravitating back onto her feet to the floor. She landed gracefully and shuffled over to the large double doors, clicking her fingers which sent the overhead lights back on. Upon opening the door, Bee found who else but Vortex in his pajama boxers and gray singlet on the other side; he looked to have just woken up.

Seeing her boyfriend, Bee let off a warm smile; “Morning, sleepyhead,” she softly cooed.

“Morning, sugar,” Vortex greeted back, his rough voice smooth as silk. He pecked her gently on her cheek, a kiss that Bee replicated back, but right on his lips. Letting out a massive yawn that could wake the dead, Vortex uttered; “Sorry for bothering you, hon, but uhm… there’s a Sinner, on the line. He wants to talk to you.” As he announced this, he showed off Bee’s phone in one of his hands, showing that a call was indeed active.

A pained groan escaped Bee’s throat as she grabbed the phone from Vortex’s hand, thanking him with another kiss before getting to business. She braced herself for the incoming pain: “Hello, it’s Bee. … Yes, the Queen of Gluttony, who else? … Yes, I’m fucking awake! I’m talking to you right now, aren’t I? Who is this? … Hermann— Hermann who, which one? … Goering… Oh! The fat one, right?”

The thinly veiled jab disguised as a rough guess was met by angry bellowing. Bee’s little mischievous smirk turned into a slack jaw, and she rolled her eyes; “Oh calm down, you little man, I asked ‘cause there’s two Hermanns! *Sheesh, drama queen alert…* Yeah so what, why’re you calling? It’s early. And you woke up my boyfriend, by the fucking way! … The concert. Of course I remembered it’s today, I’m coming. I got my garb ready and everything, medals and all.”

Information was suddenly sent her way, causing the Sin to pause and listen; “What? … Will he now? Really thoughtful of him, really fucking thoughtful. … Two hours, noted. Yes, yes, I’ll see you there. Oh and next time, don’t wake my fucking boyfriend. That okay, bitch, or have we got a problem?” Bee stood in silence for a few seconds before reeling the phone from her ear, looking down at the screen with a sneer; “Motherfucker, he hung up on me.”

“You did give him hell,” Vortex remarked with a half-cocked smirk, having been thoroughly entertained. He was thankful to never have been on the receiving end.

Bee handed her phone back to the hound standing before her. “That’s what assholes get for waking my boyfriend, shugs,” she said with no regrets, shutting the doors to the meditation chamber behind her; “Ugh. You know I’ve got that thing to go to today, yeah?”

“The concert? Yeah, heard about it,” Vortex said passively, walking alongside Bee who was making strides back to the bedroom. “Not very happy about going, are ya? You got that look in your eyes.”

She did indeed have ‘that’ look in her eyes, one that expressed deep dissatisfaction, and a great deal of reluctance. ”Part and parcel of me being a Queen, Tex,” Bee let out a sigh, shaking her head; “Sucks to be me at times. Ain’t always parties and getting fucked up, sadly. Sometimes I gotta adult.”

In brisk strides Bee flew into the bedroom and threw open the hexagonal-patterned dresser doors. Amongst her casual attire of assorted crop tops, bikinis, shorts and jeans was a sight to behold; a long flowing, black ceremonial garb guarded by clear protective tailor’s wrapping. It was a majestic outfit, and a testament to the skills of whoever had sewn it however long ago. Like the bottom which skimmed the floor, the long flowing sleeves were so extensive, that the entirety of her hands would surely be engulfed by their entire length. The uniform wasn’t just black however, as also incorporated within it were bands of woven gold, white, and silver, patterned along the cuffs in intricate patterns up to where the forearm section ended. Crossed across from the left shoulder down to the right hip was a silver sash, this which ended in a second sash that ran widthwise across the waist, all of this which guarded a black lace corset. Topping the uniform off was a black ceremonial linen headdress, sporting two large ostrich-esque feathers which protruded boastfully from its side, silver and gold respectively.

Briefly taking the time to marvel at her impressive uniform, Bee stripped the clear protective wrapping off it and threw it to one side. “Wanna help me put this on,” the Sin Queen beckoned Vortex through the means of a soft coo, beginning to undress from her crop top that revealed her scarlet lace bra.

Vortex of course happily obliged, fighting hard the urge to let his undying love for his girlfriend turn into a passionate ‘touchy-feely’ session. Gladly he took both her crop top and shorts, folding them nearly and discarding them on the foot of their expansive bed. “Can’t say I’ve seen you wear that often,” Vortex said, referring to the uniform.

“Oh, I don’t,” Bee smiled, sifting through the hanged clothes to find the undershirt; “It’s only a ceremonial thing from fucking centuries ago. Old as fuuuck! Comfortable though, last time I checked, which was… oh shit, how long’s it been? Eh, oh well!” With that she found her undershirt, exclaiming a little “a-ha” before throwing it on, doing up every button from the top down.

In the meantime Vortex grabbed the lace corset and opened it up, aligning all four armholes with his quad-armed girlfriend’s appendages that she had stretched behind her. One tight pull of the linen laces assured the corset was gripped into place, snugly fitting around Bee’s curvy figure.

“Nnf-! Ye-Yeah, just like that,” Bee winced and adjusted the black outfit piece, making sure that her breasts were comfortable, as well as her stomach and back. “Huff… Alright! Now the dress,”

she uttered, allowing Vortex to do the work of pulling it over her.

In truth Bee loved having him do this for her, just the feeling of his big, burly hands that could squeeze her whole head being so delicate and gentle with her little flimsy self. It sent stars exploding in her head, a warm shivering feeling never failing to arise. Warm shivers went up the Sin Queen's back as Vortex adjusted her dress, the whole main attraction of the uniform swaying freely as it draped loosely down her body. Giving the hellhound a break from being her most obedient servant, Bee did the honors of donning her silver sash, then excitedly stepped back with an energetic skip.

With a flirtatious smirk, Bee gave Vortex a little show, twirling around so as to let her dress ripple and sway. "So," the Sin smiled; "What do ya think! Looking fly as fuck, right?"

Vortex inspected his girlfriend carefully, biting his lip with equal parts focus and attraction. "Well shit! If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're an actual slice of cake. A sexy slice of cake, even."

Bee, humored by the comment, entertained the bulky figure; "Are you seriously turned on by this big old thing?"

"More than you know, honey cakes," Vortex smirked, letting his playful side come out; "Bet ya could just quench my thirst with just one lick~"

The Queen let out an excitable gasp, covering her mouth as she blushed wildly; "Oh my fucking gosh, Tex, you big ass fucking flirt!!" She pounced towards him and began dealing weak punches to his chest. "Aagh!! You can't do this to me, you big hunk of meat! You can't, you can't!"

"HAH," the muscular full-time bodyguard cackled, playing at their little game further; "Or else what, babycakes?"

"Or-Or else… Or else I'll squeal super hard, and fucking explode! Ya don't want your babycakes to explode, right? Having to pick up all those widdle pieces?"

"Gladly," Vortex purred flirtatiously, running his hand down Bee's arms as he cuddled her from behind.

Another warm and fuzzy shiver ran up the length of Bee's back, and she sighed through her nose. Cocking her head backwards to look at the love of her life, the Sin felt like she was falling in love for him all over again. Just like that Bee melted into Vortex's arms, smiling warmly as she took in his warmth. "You're such a sweet teddy bear, you know that? What would I do without you," she let slip, allowing the words to tumble out freely and full of inextinguishable love.

Much like Bee, Vortex couldn't fathom a time where he'd be out of the personification of Gluttony's life. "I dunno. Ya'd go mad, I guess," he said quietly, though his deep voice still cut through the air around them, rattling inside Bee's ears.

The sheer bass of Vortex's big, burly voice made the ancient Sin's ears twitch in delight. She couldn't help but fall into submission for him. "H-Hah. Yeah, something like that," she purred softly, nuzzling up into the hellhound's chest.

Sickly sweet as their intimacy was, it wasn't meant to last as Vortex's thoughts seemed to diverge away from the here and now, and into something rather distant. "Hon. Can I ask you something? Like, real quick."

"You know you always can," she beckoned for him to talk freely. She had made it a point from day one to Vortex that nothing was beneath her, that every concern and query he had about anything was completely fine to express.

And what a hell of a question, the hellhound's query was; "Will Loona be okay?"

"Texxie, I-… Loona's—…" Bee's tongue was tied, arrested in her throat like it was burdened by a tremendous chain. The combination of ruler's burden and the doubtful look in Vortex's eyes made the weight a whole lot worse. Struggling against the invisible crushing weight, Bee uttered the only thing she thought she could muster; "She'll… I'm sure she is, hun," she finally replied, putting on a reassuring smile.

But she wasn't sure. Not at all. She donned her order medals across her chest.

“Took your ass long enough,” was Bee’s cold greeting to Ritter, a wuft of cigar smoke assaulting her nostrils as she slid herself into the old-fashioned saloon car, ripped straight out of the nineteen-thirties.

“Good to see you, too,” Ritter greeted back in irony, his one-eyed gaze locked on her as he drew a breath of the cigar locked between his fingers. His stark white tunic looked particularly immaculate that morning, with not as much a crease in sight which didn’t dare appear.

The door was shut for Bee by one of Ritter’s guards, the Shoktrup’s organization symbol flashing her from the wearer’s dark red armband. She had seen that hooked cross before, every appearance of it no less nauseating to her senses than the last. What was even more sickening for Bee, was the fact she was sharing the back of a vehicle with a man she had grown to see as the most sly, cold, conniving piece of filth she had ever met; and she knew a lot of filth. She had never grown to trust them either, knowing Ritter’s type; the type to be loyal to themselves, and themselves only. The shoehorned pentagram the Shoktrup had included into the center of their black hooked cross didn’t fool her one bit.

The two representatives of the higher echelons of Hades’ society sat mutely, and the car with its armed escorts on either end pulled away from the grand palace of Gluttony, drifting further and further away. Further and further from the palace they got, the quieter everything became, an uneasy tension growing like a rapid cancer between both Sin and Sinner.

The deadlocked tension wasn’t lost on Ritter, being the cold analyst he was. “I know you hate me, Eure Majestät,” he pointed out calmly, sounding like he was merely taking note of it instead of a cause for concern.

“Oh yeah,” Bee piped up, flicking him a dismissive look; “When did ya figure that one out, genius?”

“You don’t make an effort to hide it. Is there a particular reason why?”

“Oh no, none at all! Don't worry, I love you guys! I just love how you freaks forced my hand just last week, putting me under immense fucking pressure against one of my own! Ha— Yeah, you just had to stroke that little power boner of yours, didn’tcha you little freak!”

“You’re quite vulgar for royalty, Eure Majestät. You surprise me.”

“Like hell I am! Ain’t no fucking way I’m changing either, so get the fuck used to it!”

Ritter seemed wholly unimpressed by her outburst of explicit language, but frankly Bee couldn’t care less. She loved to force him out of his comfort zone as frequently as possible, at every opportunity. It was menial payback for a debt he sorely needed to pay, but hardly applicable — he needed something more. It felt right to remind him of his true place, Lucifer’s opinion be damned.

“I had an audience last night,” he revealed, tapping the spent cigar ash into the built-in tray beside him; “With his Lordship, the King of Hades. We spoke about zhat day, regarding that ‘Loona’. About how zhat whole thing has affected you.”

“How very nice,” the Queen of Gluttony quipped, sarcasm heavy on her breath. She sneered at him as she cocked his head, glaring at him with disdain; “Suppose you believe that makes everything hunky-dory now, huh?”

The Sinner shook his head; “Nein. Nein, not at all. We understand zhat you despise me, and frankly so do many others. You heard of an Overlord called Pentious? A serpent fellow. I ran into him a while ago now, during Operation Spring Meadow. He wasn’t happy, zhe fact I gave him an ultimatum to disarm or be slain. But he did comply, so no bloodshed occurred. He’s just one of many who hate me with vigorous conviction, as you do.” Just as he finished, he heard Bee mumble something indiscernible under her breath, but he chose to ignore it. He continued; “His Lordship wanted me to tell you something.”

“And what’s that,” Gluttony personified groaned with boredom.

“Zhat you made the right decision,” Ritter uttered plainly.

Scoffing, Bee rolled her eyes; “Hmph! Sounds about right. Of course he believes that.”

“It wasn’t an easy decision,” the Sinner further acknowledged; “But your choice ensured the continued stability of zhis realm. Und frankly, for that, you have my full support and respect.”

“Your ‘support’ and ‘respect’ means jackshit to me,” Bee growled through her teeth, who stared out the window; “Hell I couldn’t care if you wiped my ass for me every day, and fed me like a fucking baby bird! I’m still not seeing you as anything else other than an opportunist, a shameless motherfucking careerist! You don’t care an inch about Hades, only about yourself, and-and your dumb little posse of reprobates!”

The battle of words between Bee and Ritter was well underway, though the sharply-dressed Sinner refused to buckle. Calmly he put up a black-gloved hand; “Let me finish please,” he said; “His Lordship and I came to a realization, zhat the whole situation has affected you to a significant extent. I’m not wrong, no? We understand zhat a decision of that magnitude against one of your own is not an easy thing. Und so, because of zhis, we wanted to assure you that Loona will be just fine. Furthermore vith any luck, as is our confident belief, she will eventually come to. If and when she does so, then a window of opportunity for her to return home will open.”

To the Queen’s ears, the words no doubt sounded hopeful, but too good to be true. “And why should I believe a word you say,” Bee peered with a judgmental glance, momentarily turning away from the window.

Ritter’s reply was short and straight to the point; “Have I ever lied to you?”

In truth, a very inconvenient truth at that, he hadn’t. Despite her utter disdain and loathsome feelings about him, Beelzebub knew that Ritter technically hadn’t once lied to her. All that he had told her was nothing but the truth, in a certain point of view. The Sin hated that this was the case, finding it repulsive that he was as trustworthy as he was, though a completely insufferable professional in “law and order.”

The stark black saloon car rumbled onwards, leaving the vastness of Gluttony and diverging onto the road winding to Pride. The particular road they took cut right through the heart of Wrath, but avoided most of the towns that were scattered across her dusty plains.

“Speaking of exiles…” Ritter suddenly continued, having just remembered something. He paused for a little bit, staring into space while he took a short drag of his cigar, and rid it of the spent ashes. Having collected what he wanted to bring up, he let it spill from his invisible mouth; “During our audience last night, his Lordship reminded me of another case of exile.”

”Another one,” Bee asked. She wasn’t aware of there being another instance where exile was essential.

Surprisingly the lady's lack of knowledge regarding the second case came as no shock to the Sinner, who nodded slightly and looked at her. "You wouldn't have heard of zhis one," he said; "As it was of very little significance to anyone, or anything. This one was… eh, how do you say… an experiment, I suppose? His Lordship had told me about it, assigned me to the case of zhis particularly violent imp. In outward appearance she was a short, scrawny thing, but she was full of so much aggression and rage that translated into raw strength. Even I have to admit, she shocked me, and as you know I am not one to be easily shocked."

"So you claim," Bee quipped quietly, rolling her eyes. she adjusted her medals in the meantime, making sure they were all aligned properly.

Ritter paid no mind to the comment, and proceeded; "Seventeen fellow imps she had murdered over the course of ten days, four of which were her own family. Zhe last thirteen were four prison guards and nine fellow inmates. We realized, after ve had put her in a medically induced coma, zhat she was too unstable for us to handle. Und so, what do you do with the unwanted? You discard them. Initially zhat was mein own conclusion, and so was the consensus between myself and his Lordship. But in stepped a physician who his Lordship had been in contact with for a while. He was a little man, a pug-faced hellhound called 'Doctor Hugh'. At zhe time he was responsible for your supply of 'Supplementum Pellis', but he also loved experimentation. Und so on zhis particular day, he came to us regarding an experiment which he wanted to run."

"The hypothesis was nothing extravagant — send her out of Hades. When I heard zhat all he wanted to do was to merely exile her, I took him as a fool! But his Lordship had another mind on it, and wanted to entertain his theory. So, with mild reluctance on mein part, we sent her 'up'. I still remember zhe place ve dropped her off at, a plentiful valley somewhere in South America. Once we had sent her on her way, Doctor Hugh told us to give her three weeks, and after that time had passed, we should go retrieve her. And so we waited."

"So twenty-one days passed, and zhe time was right to go retrieve her. As you would expect for a vastness like South America, it took us a little while. But we did find her — dead. Upon hearing zhat she vas dead, Doctor Hugh seemed rather excited, telling us to bring the cadaver right to him. We did as he said, vith his Lordship's permission, and so zhis brilliant little physician ran an autopsy on her. What he found made him grin vith a repulsive jubilant fascination, and he exclaimed zhat his hypothesis might very well be true. The imp had died not of anything expected, like starvation of exposure, but of something vhich he called the 'Drainage Effect'."

"As he explained it, zhis effect happens to anyone who spends an enduring amount of time outside of Hades, like if you were to extract a lightbulb from its power source. Sure, zhis "lightbulb" would maintain energy on its own for a little while, but after a certain amount of time, that energy… well, disappears. Depletes little by little, until it is completely gone. Und so, what are you left with? A

dead bulb. An empty vessel. According to him, zhis exact thing happened to this now deceased imp. Kaput. Dropped where she stood, just like that. … But see, zhat was only a hypothesis, a theory on what happened. We might never know."

Bee was left nauseous. She woke up and smelt the ashes.

Extravaganza and prestige was well underway in Pride's city center where a large crowd had gathered outside the theater. The line consisted solely of those from high society and aristocratic tendencies, gathering around the entrance in a long, disorganized line. It was overlords, goetias, incubus and succubus galore, the sheer amount of them near nauseating and fit to choke with barely any room to spare.

And amongst this sizable crowd was a gaggle of Germans. They were dwarfed in size compared to the number of goetias and the like, but they were nonetheless prominent where they stood. This was a group of what could be vaguely considered as 'friends'. Other opinions however would identify them as accomplices, patting each other on the back when nobody else would. Their chatter was audible, though submerged by the amalgamation of different conversations right around them.

One member of the group, the portly one of them all, reared his head towards the road, a grimace forming on his crooked-toothed mouth. Whatever patience he had left for the expected arrival was fading fast, and the time for the performances to start fast approaching. "Where the hell is that man? He should've been here by now," the Sinner said with dismay.

"Give him time, Hermann," the Sinner, whose face was shrouded in bandages replied; "It's a long way from here to Gluttony, no?"

"Bloody long way," the fat 'Hermann' agreed, his tone a low inconvenienced growl; "You'd think he'd just let that woman come herself, but no! He wants to act all chivalrous for her, trying to make amends with her! If there's any amends needed to begin with."

"Amends, amends! It's always 'amends' vith him," another member of the group moaned; "You know vhat it is? He grovels too much to zhat upper class, them 'Sins'. We don't owe them anything, but they owe everything to us. But here ve have Herr Ritter, waltzing about as if it's the other way round!"

“His thought process is an enigma. But to give him credit, it has vorked out well for us,” yet another Sinner spoke up, this one shorter than the rest and with a face which was weak in the jaw department. In addition to the recessive jawline, his head tapering outward up to the summit where his crown began, meeting with a brown peaked cap which sat on top.

The humanoid Sinner with his head profile akin to a gaunt skull stepped to the curb and leant outwards. Traffic was abundant on the road with all sorts of cars, private and otherwise. Amongst them all not too far away was a black Saloon car, its armored car escorts sticking out like a sore thumb. “Speak of zhe devil, and he vill arrive,” the short German paraphrased, stepping back to clear the way as the vintage vehicle approached.

The thick smell of gasoline and oil hovered underneath everyone’s noses as the leading armored car pulled in, coming to a stop once the black car it was escorting had halted in front of the stunning red carpet. Hopping out quick-smart from the front armored vehicle was a tall imp dressed head to toe in the Shoktrup’s uniform, the hooked cross sewn onto his jacket’s left upper arm. Without a moment’s delay he swung the door open and stood at attention, allowing for who else but Hermann O. Ritter to step out, fixing his peaked cap atop his darkness-shrouded head.

At once the arms of Ritter’s posse shot out in tandem, saluting him with a click of their booted heels. There was much respect for the rank that this man from the Rhine withheld, despite their reservations of his personal character and questionable approach to things.

Ritter clicked his own albeit invisible heels and saluted in return; “Kameraden,” he greeted in a lukewarm voice; “Good to see you all here, very good. Apologies for zhe delay, we took zhe long way to avoid argument with the Wrath locals.”

“Of course, of course,” the bandage-faced Sinner, ‘Heinrich’, nodded along, adjusting the small round glasses perched upon the outline of his nose. He glanced over Ritter’s shoulder and saw Beelzebub stepping out, the medals on her black and white uniform rattling as she donned her feathered ceremonial hat. “Und I see you’ve bought her Lordship along vith you. I trust you didn’t nag her ear off, ja?”

“Not to death, no. But close enough,” was Ritter’s vaguely humorous answer, looking back towards Bee who looked stone-faced as she walked on by. Not only did Bee not acknowledge Ritter’s existence, but also outright ignored the rest of the German’s little group of associates. ”Close enough,” he muttered under his breath, watching the Sin vanish behind the crowd and into the theater. Attention to the Queen aside, Ritter shifted to other pressing matters; “Security situation, Herr Heinrich. How is it looking?”

“We have security all over zhe place, both undercover und blatantly obvious,” Heinrich duly informed, and he discreetly gestured towards the theater’s grand entrance.

There stood two guards of the Shoktrup, their dark uniforms contrasting sorely with the bright colors around them, and their armored matte chest plates obvious for all to see.

“Zhere isn’t an entry or exit zhat isn’t being guarded, and in addition, security checks vith everyone present are being run at every hour. In the event zhat anything vere to happen, we have five hundred men on standby as reserves.”

“And the possibility of something happening?”

“Next to none,” Heinrich replied; “Everything here is quite air tight.”

“Good,” Herr Ritter nodded with reserved satisfaction, looking around for himself into the crowd and beyond; “Good. … So! Do tell me, what’s the progress like on Project Asclepius?”

Swiftly Bee sifted through the crowd, skimming past the living maze made of an array of all sorts of people, while simultaneously keeping her uniform as immaculate as possible. In truth she wanted nothing to do with this concert, the performances and everything, rather preferring to be at home with the comfort of Vortex and nobody else. But that was merely a wish, for reality had other ideas. Instead of being at home, all warm and comfortable, she was here in the cramped luxurious halls of some grand theater in the middle of Pride. She hated it.

“Eyy, here comes trouble! Thought ya’d never make it, woman!” Mammon’s shrill and grating voice cut into Bee, coaxing her to look rightward where she found the Lord of Greed waltzing towards her. His gigantic dark green uniform — now minus one sleeve — was already creased, notably around the midsection and sash where they all bunched up over his stomach. Pride in one’s appearance was a slightly foreign concept for the massive Sin.

“Huff— yes, I made it. Hello, Mammon,” Bee reluctantly greeted back, not particularly happy to see her Greed counterpart.

Mammon could practically smell the disdain she had for him. “Awwe, I love ya too,” he sarcastically greeted back; “Thought I’d come down and escort ya up, seemin’ that I love ya so much. Fuck, we all do!”

“Great to hear,” Bee said with barely any enthusiasm; “So who’s here, just you and Ozzie?”

“Yeaahhh, just us! Leviathan’s off doing some shit that isn’t my business, couldn’t make it. Which sucks ‘cause I kinda like him, but oh well!” The two Sins contrasting wildly in size sauntered together back to their private booth, heading up a flight of wide stairs carpeted in velvet. “Yanno though,” Mammon continued; “Between you an’ me, it’d be fucken bonza if old Luc’ could come to this sorta stuff once in a while. Hasn’t been out in fucken ages!”

“He’s a recluse, Mammon,” was Bee’s eye-rolling reply; “As if he’s going to come out to this, let alone come out at all. He’s been like that for as long as we’ve known him. Oh, and… sorry to hear, about the hand.”

“Yeaaahh, I don’t wanna talk about it. ‘S long as that little cunt’s sufferin’ wherever she is, I’m happy.”

“Don’t doubt you are,” Bee muttered in a growl to herself, feeling a spark of red hot anger rise up inside. She dreaded the fact that her Greed counterpart may very well be right, and that the blood was ultimately on her hands.

The further they went up the immaculate staircase, the less populated it got until it was no more than the Queen of Gluttony, the Lord of Greed, and a goetia coming the opposite direction. Just as she turned the last landing before the upper floors, Bee abruptly stopped and spun herself around, gawking back down the stairs she had only just climbed. She didn’t know exactly what, or rather who it was, but Bee swore she had just seen someone; a man who sported a striking regal uniform. By all logic she would’ve seen him on the stairway down, but upon looking down at the empty staircase she had ascended only moments ago, the figure was nowhere to be seen. Whoever she had seen had simply vanished, if he was even there to begin with. A feeling of familiarity buzzed within the Queen’s head.

“You aight there, toots,” Mammon asked in all of his sensitive wisdom.

“…Ye-Yeah. I think so,” Bee stammered a little, second guessing herself as she continued walking. She chalked it up to a hallucination — she hoped it was.

“Just remember what we went through, you’ll do great,” Fizzarolli told Verosika backstage, doing his best to calm her nerves.

”I’m trying to, Fizz, I really am,” an unusually nervous Verosika sputtered, glaring right into herself in the dressing room mirror.

Stage fright wasn’t something that the Succubus fell into often, in fact she hadn’t experienced it for the past five years. But tonight felt different; tonight was a whole different beast, with a whole array of different faces and eyes that cut deep into her. Verosika’s comfort zone was performing for horny young adults, not the utmost high echelons of society with songs as old as dust! At least the dress that she wore now was more of her liking; a long slimming sparkly white dress which sat snugly around her waist.

“D-Do you think I’m overthinking this,” Verosika asked cautiously, looking at the imp through the expensive mirror’s reflection.

“Ehhh.. a little bit,” Fizzarolli considered; “But hey, it’s natural! This is a whole new level for you, outta your comfort zone and such. But if you can perform for a thousand sex-driven douchebags, this’ll be a walk in the park!”

“Fuck, I hope so,” the Succubus lightly gasped with a weak smile, trying to gather her bearings as best she could. Truly, she hoped.

A roar of a thousand-strong applause echoed beyond the dressing room door as the orchestra wrapped up its performance of an impressive, impactful ensemble that spanned a whole twenty minutes. Verosika’s time to prove herself had come.

In an act of compassionate mercy, Fizzarolli helped Verosika up from her chair, holding onto her until she could maintain her balance. “Hey, look at me,” he coaxed gently, to which the performer did so; “You’ll do just fine.”

Though her nerves were shaken and her usual confidence compromised, it was these words from the imp who had been through so much that consoled her enough to muster calm within herself. And with this, she found the strength to breathe and smile. “Thanks, Fizz,” Verosika sighed in a hushed whisper, finding her courage once more.

A firm pat on the back came Verosika’s way, and the culprit returned a smile of his own. “Welp! I’ll go introduce ya,” Fizzarolli digressed and made headways to the stage.

Verosika shuttled behind, preparing herself accordingly. A part of her figured her career depended on this performance.

With his finely pressed tuxedo and red bowtie, Fizzarolli strided from stage left, facing the crowd with a polite smile to the thousand-strong audience. The imp stopped when he reached center stage, both hands clasped together in front of himself, and he opened his mouth to speak.

“BOOOOOOO!!”

All eyes flew up to one of the private booths where Mammon, sitting alongside Bee and Ozzie, was making a complete spectacle of himself. “I SAID BOOOOO, YA LITTLE CUNT!! FUCKEN HISSSSSSS!!”

Bee was out of patience who slapped a hand over his big mouth, hissing sharply at him; “Mammon, shut the actual fuck up!”

After shooting the Sin he so despised with a brave glare, Fizzarolli cleared his throat and finally began; “Hope you’ve all enjoyed everything so far, folks! Absolutely class performance by that orchestra back there, I mean holy shit, what a show! BUT! That was only act one, as we have a whole range of other mindfucking performances tonight, and this next one’s no exception. Lowlifes and degenerates, Verosika Mayday!”

Another roar of applause went up in the audience when Verosika shuffled onto the stage, her immaculate high heels clicking against the varnished wooden floorboards. She got into position as the applause died down, and an ensemble of imps followed behind, getting to their own positions behind Verosika where a row of chairs were set up. This small band poised their brass and stringed

instruments, waiting for the conductor to give his cue who was waiting on the star of the show to begin.

Verosika peered widely into the crowd with a face of veiled nervousness, trying her best to hide the fact she was way out of her comfort zone. The sheer silence was painful for the singled out Succubus to bear, she had to make a move. And so, with a slow, deep breath, and with all eyes on her, Verosika began. She nodded discreetly to the conductor, and suddenly the hall was filled with an introductory brass ensemble.

The trumpets gracefully dimmed in tone, allowing for Verosika to take center stage. And what a stage she took:

"We'll meet again,

Don't know where, don't know whe-een!

But I know we'll meet again, some sunny daa-aay!"

"Keep smiling through,

Just like you, always do-oo!

'Til the blue skies drive the dark clouds, far awaa-aay!"

So far, so good — Verosika had just aced the first few verses of this nauseatingly old song, and in tandem her confidence seemed to creep back to her, rising the further she sung. But she was only through just under a quarter of the song, and so she pressed on:

"So will you please say hello,

To the folks that I know,

Tell them, I won't be long!"

"They'll be happy to know,

That as you saw me go,

I was sing-ing this song!"

“We’ll meet again,

Don’t know where, don’t know whe-een!

But I know we’ll meet again some sunny daa-aay!”

“Keep smiling through,

Just like you, always do-oo!

‘Til the blue skies drive the dark clouds, far awaa-aay!”

The halfway mark had been passed, and Verosika finally felt at a resemblance of comfort and confidence. Not full confidence, no, but confidence nonetheless.

As the veteran performer opened her mouth to sing the repeat of the chorus, the most unexpected thing occurred; a part of the audience, a hundred strong, began to participate. The participants were smartly dressed Sinners, with uniforms of white, grey and black, united in one voice, and they sung with steady confidence like they knew it off by heart. It was bizarre to bear witness to, but still Verosika sung, her voice just scraping above the other singers. A smile of accomplishment appeared across her lips, feeling as though she had reached new horizons in her career. They loved her; they all loved her.

The performance, so criminally short for such a talent like Verosika, was approaching its end, and so she gave it her all for the crowd. One big hurrah to end her piece with a bang:

“We’ll meet again,

Don’t know where, don’t know whee-een!

But I know we’ll meet again… some sunny, daaaaaayy—”

-= BOOOMM!! =-

A massive dust cloud spewed from up high, and descended onto the stage then into the crowd! Confused bellows and screams rang out across the audience, everyone shielding their faces and reeling away from the debris that fell from the stage’s roof!

It was Verosika who got the brunt of the dust, coughing and spluttering as she crouched down to the floor, fanning the choking dust away from her face. Through the blinding dust and cacophony of panicked noise, Verosika heard the sound of someone sliding down the heavy ropes of the stage curtains, then boots landing harshly against the now tarnished lacquered floorboards.

The culprit's shrill voice hollered over the noise, screaming about wanting his daughter back, and that he would kill everyone in sight if he didn't get what he wanted — *"You hear me up there, you sick fucking bastards?! I want my daughter! I want her now!!"*

From voice alone, Verosika knew exactly who it was.

The intruder then began firing, deafening flintlock pops exploding right next to Verosika's ear, her ears ringing painfully while projectiles careening at breakneck speed into the crowd. She counted four shots, one after the other before another shot from somewhere else rang out, sending the assailant to the floor, writhing in agony and unquenchable fury. The last thing Verosika saw through her obstructed eyes before passing out was Blitz, twisting and turning against the grip of the Shoktrup's armed guards. Blood pooled around him from the wound to his shoulder blade, seeping into the floorboards to which he lay on. He had successfully made his mark.

(Act III) - Salted Wounds

Blitz was thrown violently into the recesses of a worn wooden chair, a blow to his face by a fist following right after — “AGH! Fuck!!” — a searing pain shot up his back from the blunt force, almost concussing him in the process.

But he wasn’t going to go down without a fight, not this imp; he began thrashing, clawing against the restraints that now bound him to his seat. He laughed boisterously, in defiance against his captors; “HAHAH!! Seriously?! Yo-You seriously think these itty bitty restraints are gonna keep me down, you filthy cum-guzzling motherfucker? I’ll kill you. I’ll kill every SINGLE one of yo—”

THWACK!!

“You best vatch your tongue,” the Shoktrup interrogator warned, cracking the bones in his fisted hand after the ferocious left hook. His gravely voice buzzed electrically behind the charcoal gray ventilated mask he wore, cutting right into Blitz’s ears with intent to harm him, or worse, if he continued to disobey. The red light that emanated from the brass-lined goggles also cut deep into the imp’s retinas, the longer he stared at them.

Though Blitz, despite his unfavorable position, scoffed; “Tff— Come on, fuckface! As if your little threats are gonna sway me from mocking ya.”

“Suit yourself,” the masked Sinner said, then dealt a blunt blow to Blitz’s stomach.

Blitz dry retched from the sudden force, the pain exacerbated by the bullet wound to his shoulder. He spluttered, he gasped, but his spirit was unbroken, and defiant as ever. His temporarily compromised faculties were regained with a struggle, and he regained focus onto the tall Sinner hulking over him. The whole uniform he wore looked antique for lack of a better word, with a helmet that looked over a hundred years old, and a tunic that appeared just about the same age. The uniform he wore too was worn, ragged in places where the wool had become wired and matted, as if laundry was a luxury he couldn’t afford. For the little time he had to think about it, it reminded Blitz of the uniforms in an old black-and-white human realm film he had seen once — something about a ‘Western Front’.

With a hearty spit onto the ground, Blitz grinned bravely, showing off his sharp yellow teeth to his captor. “Ouugghh-hohoho, you’re enjoying this, arentcha you sick bastard? You love the torture

porn, I can tell! I can see it right through that shitty Chernobyl mask of yours. This is nothing to me, fucko — NOTHING! Not after the shit I've been through!"

"You," the Sinner scoffed back, finding humor in the lesser being's claim; "You've been through shit? I died at Stalingrad."

The battered and bled imp cackled at this; "And that makes you special somehow? Give me a fucking break! Hellooo, we all die, asshole! Ooooh, look at youuuu, you froze to death in some foxhole in Fuck-knuckleville, Timbuktu! What an achievement, a-a true act deserving of an Iron Cross, presented by Der Fuhrer himself!"

Just before the interrogator could again take his anger out, a swift knock on the iron door came from behind him.

He shot up and turned to it; "Who is it?!"

"Der Kommandant," Ritter's muffled voice responded, his timbre distinct with the cold, calculated calm it boasted.

A brief moment of hesitation made the masked Sinner dither, turning his attention between Blitz and the door. He growled like an angered dog before choosing the latter, shuffling over to it before opening the way in.

There stood Ritter in his obnoxious uniform of spectacular white, letting himself in with hands clasped behind his back, inspecting the imp tied before him with a certain level of indifference. He spoke; "First off, Herr Blitz, do not disrespect zhe sheer importance and privilege of receiving zhe Iron Cross. Second of all, you are here to cooperate. I ask zhat you do exactly that."

"HA! Eat shit," Blitz promptly spat back, again spitting at the ground.

"You should consider yourself lucky zhat we haven't killed you. As of yet, that is. The shot zhat we took was made specifically to keep you alive, a second chance if you will. Not zhat we… haven't give you enough chances already."

“Psh! Chances, chances…” Blitz said in an almost dismissive gesture; “You didn’t give my fucking daughter a chance, why give it to me?”

“Because we’re fair,” ‘Der Kommandant’ insisted, stepping a foot forward, his invisible heel clicking against the cold, hard floor. He looked to Blitz’s wound, inspecting the festering, nasty nature of it with what could be described as a morbid fascination. “Hm, very good. A very clean shot, barely a margin of error.”

He stroked his chin carefully, and underneath all of that vantablack mass that made up his face, Blitz swore he could see a toothy grin. “See we take pride in our marksmanship,” Ritter continued; “And zhat wound you have zhere is a testament to that fact. Professionalism is indeed key to us, don’t you know? Unlike you, with your wild pot shots into zhe crowd, hurling at nobody in particular. It’s pathetic, really. Unbecoming! An insult to zhe firearms you are using.”

Blitz rolled his eyes widely; “If I wanted a critique from you, I would’ve asked for one. What would you know about guns anyway?”

“I fought in a war,” was Ritter’s growling rebuke.

“Oho yeah? And how’d that go, buddy? Looks like it didn’t go too well with your calfs got blown to bits, judging by your lack of feet! Come get your arches readjusted by Doctor Ivan and his magical lead and gunpowder therapy—”

THWACK!!

Another hand careened into the side of Blitz’s face, sending a tooth tumbling to the ground. Ritter had hit him hard, forceful enough to finally smack some sense into the provocateur; that’s if he had any more sense to spare, with the captive now groaning absentmindedly and limp in the chair.

He tilted the imp’s bruised head to inspect Blitz’s condition, finding him glaring evilly right back at him. “Och gut! You’re not clinically braindead. Just about,” Ritter uttered callously, releasing his grip from Blitz’s right horn. “Let’s try zhis again, yes? You’re going to cooperate vith both of us, and you’re going to listen to everything we have to say to you. When needed, you vill answer our questions. Is zhat understood?”

"…If I nod along to this shit… Mmrgh… will you stop hitting me," Blitz gurgled, feeling the threat of a concussion setting in as consciousness lapsed.

There was a pause as both Sinners looked to each other, as if seeing if the other agreed to the terms and conditions. "Very much depends, I'm afraid," Ritter told the captive, adjusting the wrists of his black leather gloves; "But you have another job, too. Zhat's to not annoy me any further. I'm sure you can manage zhat."

To this, Blitz didn't say anything. He could give no guarantees about much, Ritter knew this.

Convinced he had controlled the situation, and the tables were in his favor, Ritter got straight to business. "Let's begin," the German said; "How did you do what you did today? Who gave you those explosives?"

The bruised lesser being rolled his eyes; "Hey dumbass, I was an assassin. I had a whole lot of that shit lying about willy-nilly."

"Did you conspire to do zhis vith anyone?"

"Nope! Completely on my own," Blitz in due process boasted, sounding prideful in his work; the blood-spattered grin he sported said as much.

"You sound accomplished about zhis."

"Fuck yeah I am! D-Do you realize what I just did? Popped a few lead caps into some of your little rich fuck friends back there! Who did I hit, huh? Tell me."

"I'm not telling you zhat," Ritter stated bluntly, shaking his head. He couldn't believe the nerve to ask existed.

"Come ooon, tell me! It's gotta be someone good!" When the silence set in between himself and the two Germans looming over him, the gears began to turn inside his battered head; "Waaaait… it's Stolas, isn't it? I hit him, didn't I?"

“Stolas vasn’t even there. He didn’t come,” Ritter hence broke the news, looking deadpan as he said it.

There was a tinge of disappointment that flickered in Blitz’s look when he heard this, as if he had expected something different; something better. “Psh! Coward…” he quipped and looked away, glancing to the door behind the men that held him there, his only way to freedom.

With the lack of proper attention came a bout of frustration that flared up within Ritter. He knew exactly what the imp was planning; an escape. In that moment, he saw it necessary to break him down. “You know, it’s interesting,” the German noted; “Zhis right here, zhis same exact chair you’re sitting in, is the very chair zhat I held your daughter in. She wasn’t very talkative, nein, but I’m certain zhe message got across to her.”

Inconspicuously conniving was Ritter’s demeanor as he inspected the look on the imp’s beaten face. His hope was to get some sort of reaction from him, evidence that would double as assurance that Blitz would start to behave himself. Ritter was a master of psychological warfare, having been introduced to it during the war years and practiced it for as long as he’d resided in Hades.

And so he put this niche, devious profession of his to practice. He continued on the topic of daughter; “Much as I’ve given you a hard time thus far, I must say you’ve raised quite zhe daughter. She’s ferocious, defiant even in zhe face of unfavorable odds. Who knew a woman like zhat would have so much fight, even after the beating we gave her. It vasn’t much, don’t worry, but just enough to make an impression.”

The only response to this that Blitz gave was a glassy-eyed stare. His head hung loosely on his shoulders, giving his eyes all the work of looking upwards.

“We explained to her,” Ritter pressed on; “About zhe mistakes zhat she’s made. Now if you know anything about zhe guilty, they always claim no wrongdoing. She did exactly that. It’s one thing to be guilty of something and justify it, but to deny it? That’s a whole other courage on its own.”

The effort on his sanity and defiant resolve was not without effort, but Blitz despite it all remained cold sober in the face of his enemy. Inside, however, he felt his stomach turn over. They had hurt her, and he couldn’t do anything about it. His duty as a father to defend his daughter had been denied to him, and thus he failed in his lifelong commitment. The one thing that still gave him

purpose was paternalism, and even in this did he once again fall short — this pained him more than anything.

He glared evilly into Ritter's black void of a face, as mist began to form like a lacquer over his irises. "Psh, typical. … I know what you're gonna do," he croaked quietly, a weak grin splintering his bruised red mug; "I-I know exactly where this is heading — you're gonna kill me. Trust me, I know, this is nothing new or special to me. Seems just like you to resort to this sorta malarkey. You're unoriginal."

Ritter seemed almost insulted; "I think you'll find I can think outside the box," he said in his serpent's tongue, and outstretched a hand to his partner. With that he was handed a book, a novel to be exact, and displayed it to the imp; "You recognize this?"

"Uh… Yeah. It's a book that I own."

"'Crime and Punishment'," Ritter announced the name, glancing down at the red cover with bold white letters; "Funny. I never recognized you as zhe reading type, if your inability to spell is anyzhing to go by. What made you pick this up?"

"Dude, I dunno! Just thought it'd look pretty to have, I don't look deeper into shit! I haven't even read it since I got it, like what, four years ago?"

"Well it just seems interesting to me zhat you would have a book like this," Ritter elaborated; "I've read Dostoevsky, especially zhis one. If I can recall, I'd say with a certain amount of confidence zhat in some places the plot mirrors your own personal history. Rodion's a broke and antisocial recluse — you're a broke and antisocial recluse. He gets tempted into murder — you get tempted into murder. If what you're telling me is true, und you've never read an inch inside this novel, then perhaps your fate has a sick sense of humor."

Blitz clicked his tongue in a scoff; "Hey, look at that! Something we can agree on." The tone of his wit fell short as the deep internal grief for his daughter hung heavy in his throat.

In his usual fashion, Ritter stuck to formalities; "Agreeing or not, we're not here to talk cordially." The little red paperback book was handed back to the masked assistant, who handled it with a certain level of respect. "You've caused enough of a disturbance for mein superiors to determine you unfit to live as a free man. Zhey demand from me that I deal with you swiftly. Of course Herr

Mammon expects the death penalty, and I'm sure his Lordship does too. But see his Lordship your king has granted me liberty to decide on vhat to do with you."

"Well congratu-fucking-lations," Blitz sneered bitterly.

"Luckily for you, mein herr, I don't agree with the death penalty. It's too swift of a sentence, brings forth a 'justice' that I don't think should be called as such. What is death really? It's a release. I do not believe in its supposed effectiveness, as there is none."

"So what then, huh? Ya gonna torture me instead, use me as your plaything until I bleed out?"

A plotting look flickered in Ritter's one-eyes glare — he knew exactly what would be done with this perpetual nuisance. "Oh no, I wouldn't say that," he said with an invisible grin.

"Schnell! Steig in den Bus! Los geht's!" — The booming voice of the Sinner prison guard barked over the rattling sound of the prison bus' engine.

A glum row of imps in plain steel gray uniforms lumbered onto the blue-gray bus, most of their faces marked with the same look that heralded; "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." Some however didn't get the message, those few still with the inexhaustible urge to escape that they tried to contain for their lives sake. Those who were smart enough to stay quiet, despite their desires of freedom, knew from that hour on that resistance was a pointless venture. Hope had long since died for them.

But as always, there was always an odd one out. Blitz was nudged forcefully into the prison bus with enough force to nearly make him fall. He cussed out the guard who shoved him in his usual fashion, and he hobbled down the aisle lined either side with fellow dull-faced lessers. Blitz was flanked by two gigantic hellhounds, both wearing a plain white shirt and black tie complimented by black trousers, a thin yellow band running vertically down the entire length of either leg. The two guards forcefully ushered him down to the far end of the bus, where lay a divided back space guarded by a riveted steel door; the words **"=HIGH RISK PRISONERS ONLY="** stenciled in red taunted Blitz as he approached it.

Violently Blitz was thrown headfirst into the closed off booth, his horns colliding painfully with the back wall that just about gave him a concussion. If the sudden umpteenth bash to his head wasn't enough to make him wince, the singular bright orange bulb certainly did when he mistakenly opened his eyes towards it — it was like glaring into a perpetual flashbang. Adding insult to injury was the literal plank of wood that was his seat, a crude sort of bench not even a drunkard would fall asleep on.

With no hope of escape for him and his morale in doubt, Blitz slumped himself onto the unbelievably uncomfortable bench, nestling his head up against the cold steel wall as he scrunched up into a ball. The imp sat there quietly for the first time post-arrest, the throbbing pain in his shoulder's latest gunshot wound keeping him from making sudden movements — even he had to admit, they had gotten him good.

A sudden jolt of the entire vehicle signaled movement, the bus at last now on its way to whatever shithole the powers that be had in store for its passengers. The loneliest passenger of all, right at the back behind the rest of the murderers, thieves, and other assorted criminals, had time to himself to think; to hone in to himself the deep quagmire he was now in.

But he wasn't alone, not really — "Found yourself in quite the shithole, huh?"

Blitz jumped in fright and shot his head to the right, finding a disturbing sight to behold; it was his father. "D-Dad.."

Cash Buckzo let out a big, sniveling grin; "Knew you'd notice me eventually, ya little shit." The arguably failed father was sitting across the way from Blitz in a slouched posture, on the exact opposite end of the bench. "So," he continued; "Do tell me, oh son of mine. What the fuck are you doing in the back of a bus like this?"

"I'm—… I-I'm going to jail."

"You're going to jail," Cash repeated in a clearly mocking way. He shrugged at the news as though it was nothing to dwell on; "Well shoot, can't say that's too much of a surprise, to be honest. Especially with that… little biz' of yours ya had going on. How's that going?"

"…I dissolved it," Blitz muttered, still wide-eyed and parched without breath; "Some-Sometime earlier, this week."

“Hmph, right. Kinda expected that to happen,” Cash said, then let out the grossest cough known to man; “AHEM— Always knew you couldn’t even run a peanut stand if it meant saving your life. … You remember me telling you that, boy?”

“Cl—… Cl-Clear as day,” Blitz said breathlessly, feeling delirium and anger at the same time — it felt intoxicating.

The intoxicating concoction Blitz was feeling in that moment wasn’t lost on Cash, who seemed to detect it radiating off his son. He snickered, shaking his head disapprovingly at his offspring; “Now son, I don’t get why you’re getting all worked up and jittery at me. I’m not the hotheaded dumbass who put myself in the isolation cell of this here bus! Yanno who did? You. That was all you. Ya had the chance to take responsibility for your actions, and control yourself, but you blew it. And over what, your ‘daughter’?”

Blitz sneered right back; “You wouldn’t know love for your family if it hit you in the face, you heartless bastard! You didn’t even cry for mom! The only tears you shed were for your precious fucking circus, when it all came crashing down around you! Hah, yeah, and I’m GLAD I burnt that piece of shit to the ground! How about that, asshole?!”

Cash’s sniveling grin turned evil, and he uttered a disgusting remark; “Even after what it did to Fizz?”

“Ohh, you BITCH!!” Blitz threw himself across the room and tackled Cash to the ground, scrunching his fist up into a tight ball to beat his father to death. If he was going to be charged for attempted murder or whatnot, he might as well go all in!

…

But Cash wasn’t there. Blitz growled and crawled himself back onto the hardwood bench — he knew it was too good to be true. Cash’s voice still rang in his ears, taunting him.

—=TUESDAY=—

The third guitar string down twanged a blunt note and it faded slowly into silence, the white-furred finger that had plucked it waiting for it to settle back to stillness. After a tightening of the middle most string, the finger plucked it again, the pitch that tad bit higher. A little too high for the handler of the guitar, who furrowed her brow faintly and got back to fine tuning.

The past few days had gone without a hitch for Loona, partly because she hadn't been out of the house for nigh on three days. This wasn't without its benefits; bruises that she had sustained had now almost disappeared completely, reduced to a bunch of minuscule dark spots which would completely disappear in a day or two. Furthermore the psychological anguish, although still present without a doubt, had been numbed to such an extent that it enabled Loona to live a relatively normal life. Eating, showering, and dressing herself were all within her motivation's reach, even if she did have to force herself on the odd occasion. Still, progress was progress, and Loona was indeed on the front foot.

Blowing a huff of air through her pursed lips, Loona shook her head and plucked the difficult guitar string for the umpteenth time. She raised a satisfied brow when she found it to be closer to her liking, and tugged at it again, the note sounding the exact same — satisfying. Loona looked up from her guitar and gazed out into the countryside graced by morning. It was nothing new to her, but the serenity that emanated from it all gave her a sort of reassurance that in some way, somehow, everything would turn out okay — or at least, not get any worse.

Loona drew a slow, relaxed breath and exhaled softly with closed eyes, opening them once she began to play. She didn't know what to play in particular, resorting to letting whatever came to mind do all the playing for her. What manifested from Loona's pale fingers was no particular tune she had heard before; if anything, it was a mixture of notes from a few calm, slow-paced guitar-based songs she had heard here and there. The furry, gothic guitarist managed to make it work too, even if she wasn't playing to impress anyone other than herself. In all truth, Loona loved how it sounded — it sounded good. It sounded right.

Continuing to play her blase tune, Loona looked to the front right of herself and noticed a bird perched upon the veranda's timber railing. The bird was a mourning dove, sporting dusty brown and gray feathers that blended perfectly into each other — they reminded Loona of a cloudy, late afternoon sky. The lone, round little bird peered at the lone hellhound with mindless fixation through its big, black beady eyes.

Of course Loona couldn't help but stare right back. "What're you staring at," she asked quietly to the bird, obviously not expecting an answer.

As expected, the bird just stared back, its head twitching around as it nestled itself on the railing. It seemed quite comfortable where it was.

Loona raised an eyebrow at the bird and continued to analyze it, not for any reason in particular. “You, uh… You good there? If you’re hungry, sorry. Got nothing on me.”

Still the small animal of flight gawked with its button-like eyes, and fluffed up its feathers while it stretched. Aside from the obvious consciousness, there seemed to be nothing happening inside that tiny head.

The hellhound continued to stare back, blinking until she realized the glaring absurdity that she was talking to a bird. She did talk to Octavia, or at least used to, but she didn’t count. Loona snickered quietly to herself and shook her head; “Go on, little guy. Get outta here,” she said, giving it a shooing hand which was too far away.

But the bird remained, oblivious to Loona’s instruction.

The gothic bipedal canine huffed and leant forward in her chair, though was too lazy to actually get up. She tried again; “Go on, I said get! Go away.” Finally after much gentle shooing the small avian did, flapping its little wings to search for another place to stay.

Satisfied that she was finally alone again, Loona slumped back into her seat and resumed from where she left off — at least that was her intention. Just as her pointer finger latched onto the bottom guitar string, Loona noticed a gray sedan coming through the property’s gates, slowing to a crawl as it approached. Nonchalantly she gawked at the approaching vehicle, until she looked down at her own wolf-esque body, covered head to toe in white and gray fur — that’s when the realization kicked in. The guitar string snapped in her tense grip.

Like a whirlwind Loona sprung up from her seat and rushed urgently inside the house, alarm bells blaring inside her head — she had just blown her cover, she was sure of it!

The hellhound burst through the front door and slammed it firmly shut behind her. She staggered breathlessly into the living room, feeling lightheaded; “Jim, whatever you do, don’t answer the door,” Loona quickly demanded, profusely sweating bullets.

“What are you—”

“Just do as I say!” — And so with swift footing, Loona marched into her room and slammed the door shut. The sound of her changing into her human form echoed from inside the room.

Inside her room Loona was panicking, well and truly terrified for the grave mistake she’d just made. But it wasn’t her fault, it couldn’t have been! She was just minding her own business, trying to chill out after her weekend when her life was taken away, only for some surprise visitor to stroll on up like it wasn’t anybody’s business. And now they had seen her, the ‘true’ her. All of her in her tall, furry, hellhound-y glory — she was fucked!

“Oh shit, oh shit! No fucking way, no fucking way!” — Loona gasped for breath as she slid down her bedroom wall, collapsing onto the floor onto her behind while she hoped beyond hope that her worst fears hadn’t come true. What if they hadn’t noticed her? But they must’ve, they had a whole ten seconds to notice the bipedal wolf, sitting with a guitar in her hands, chilling out like it was nobody’s business — which it was, in all matter of fact! The hellhound gritted her teeth hard, cursing angrily at the intruders; how dare they disturb the peace that she had rightfully earned, after everything she had been through, and then some!

Knok—Knok—Knok! — The dull thudding noises of a knock on the front door sent an icy chill up Loona’s back. She gasped sharply and held her breath, hoping with all of her might and strength that at least Jim would heed her direc—

Creeeak! — …He had just opened the door.

“Oh you dumb mother-*FUCKER,”* Loona hissed sharply under her breath, trying her best to not let herself be heard.

The disguised hound had no choice but to listen, wait, and brace herself for the incoming fallout. Shakily Loona pressed her ear up against the wall where she estimated the hallway was, listening intently with her heart thumping loudly inside her ears.

“Loona, it's that Father Andrei! He wants to see ya!”

“Father And— F-Father Who- ohh fuuuck…” a knot formed in Loona’s stomach when she heard this. Swallowing the gigantic lump that choked her, the terrified woman mustered the courage to call out; “Tell him to go away! I-I don’t wanna see him!”

Again Loona fell silent and listened out attentively, hearing the muffled conversation between both homeowner and priest. She couldn’t make out exact words, but the hellhound knew it was absolutely about her. Furthermore, they were talking in ‘whispers’ that weren’t really whispers at all, mostly on account of the hound’s exceptional hearing.

Rolling her eyes, Loona called out; “You know I can hear you two! You’re not slick, neither of you!”

”He’s not gonna do anything to ya,” Jim’s voice tried to coax, and he sounded to be approaching the door; *“He’s just wanting to talk, see how you’re going! It’s nothing special, just a checkup.”*

Loona had no intention to play ball; “Ugh, just tell him I’m fine! He can hear me loud and clear, right? Tha-That should be his cue to leave.”

“Loona, it’s just a few minutes,” was Jim’s third attempt at coaxing the recluse out; *“Maybe not even that!”*

The cornered hound within dithered greatly at the promise, deciding whether to judge it as empty or not. Regardless, she knew that she didn't have much of a choice; the visitor wasn't going to leave until he had seen her. “...Ugh, shit... Alright look, here’s the deal! I’ll come out, on the condition that he leaves in five— no, three minutes from the time I come out. Any longer, and I’m throwing him out myself.”

“Sounds fine to me.” — This time it was the thick accented voice of Father Andrei who replied, the way he held his speech unmistakably Russian. It was this reply that convinced Loona that it was, in fact, that brown-bearded Priest who had peered analytically at her at the gathering, though she hadn’t heard his voice before.

Now there were two things Loona hated more than anything else; feeling cornered, and being forced to do something that wasn’t entirely within her will. Both misfortunes had been put upon her shoulders at this instant, and she hated it ten times more than usual. What was more infuriating to her above all was the fact that she didn’t even have the choice to run away; what good would that do? They would’ve pestered her some other time.

Biting her tongue to not say anything damning, Loona swallowed hard and called out once again; “Fuck sake… A-Alright, I’m coming out!”

And so like a lethargic lioness creeping from her den, Loona cracked open the door and slithered through the slim opening. Having squeezed through the narrow clearing, the disguised hound shut the door and scooted slowly across the hallway and into the living room. Sure enough there was Jim, and so too was the cassock-clad, brown-bearded figure that was Father Andrei; his narrow, sharp eyebrows giving him a near fearsome look, even though his expression was obviously resting. The two men were standing almost awkwardly around the couches, having been waiting for the moody gothic lady to cease her antisocial behavior.

Her less-than-warm behavior didn’t stop however. Loona glanced at Jim, who merely gestured to the Priest standing by. And so with an eye roll she turned to the visitor with a blank, almost inconvenienced expression; “Hi,” Loona said bluntly, throwing up a half attempt at a wave.

“Hello,” was the Russian’s greeting back, blank but with a sight more effort than the ‘attempt’ Loona made. He cleared his throat and stated his business, briefly adjusting the skufia atop his head; “I’m sorry for intruding in whatever business you had. I was sent by Father Aleksander, he wanted me to see how you were going after your, uh… your ailment.”

Shifting on her feet with disinterest, Loona let out a dramatic sigh; ”Huff— Yeeahh, I figured one of you would come. Look, appreciate your effort of coming all the way out here from wherever, but you’ve kinda wasted your time. I’m fine. Like c’mon, look at me!”

“I see,” Father Andrei acknowledged, taking note of just how advanced along the healing process bruising was. He furrowed his brow and paused at it, seeming to take intrigue at the speedy nature of the gothic woman’s recovery. “It’s remarkable how you’ve healed so quickly,” he noted.

“Yeah, well…” Loona shrugged her shoulders, hands tucked deep into her shorts’ pockets; “I heal quickly. What can I say?” A small bead of sweat tumbled down her temple and onto her shoulder — she regretted even mentioning her near spotless condition.

“Do ya want anything, Father? I’m heading to the kitchen for a drink,” Jim suddenly interrupted, shuffling sideways towards said kitchen.

“Just water will be fine,” Father Andrei obliged with a gesture of his hand, then looked back towards Loona. He looked at her with a look of underlying hesitation that just barely seeped through his face.

Loona noticed it, and in turn also became hesitant, wondering with fear if he had noticed the strange being sitting outside on the veranda. She hoped, to whoever would listen, that he hadn’t.

If he had, the staunch-postured Father Andrei didn’t bother to mention it, instead proceeding according to the purpose of his impromptu visit. He let his mouth fall slack as if to speak, though for a second his words failed him. But the Priest found them once he drew an audible breath; “Father Aleksander wanted me to ask you a few things, on his behalf. Regarding what happened that day, and something you had said to him around a week ago.”

“Oh…kay,” Loona cautiously nodded along, darting her focus between Jim in the kitchen and Father Andrei a few feet away. She sunk her hands deeper into her pockets, gripping at her thighs a little.

The visitor nodded faintly also and glanced over to the furniture behind him. In turn he invited Loona to sit down on the lounge chair opposite to him; an offer which Loona in question was hesitant to take, but one she felt she couldn’t exactly refuse. So the gothic young lady sat down, directly across from the Priest who also took his chosen seat, adjusting his cassock as he sat into the cotton fabric cushioning.

But just as he sat, he paused and looked down to his left; there wedged between him and the armrest was a sketchbook, owned by none other than the amateur artist across from him. Loona tried not to yelp as he then picked it up, allowing the whole book to flop open. She just about did, albeit a squeak, when she noticed what, or rather who exactly the book had flipped open to.

Father Andrei looked with surprise and intrigue at the half-finished sketch, depicting a certain bearded man upon the white page; a likeness to the statue back at St. Basil’s. “Huh,” he exclaimed, raising his brow; “I see you’re quite the artist—”

”HEY!” — Loona threw herself from the chair and snatched the book away, huddling it away with a deeply embarrassed look on her face. She stood there, hunched over like a gargoyle with the book now firmly shut under her arm. “No, I’m-I’m not! I'm not an artist, that isn’t— this isn’t mine! This is, is…”

Loona stumbled over her words with her mind rushing at Mach speed, only ceasing her incoherent rambling when she noticed the confused look on not only the Russian's face, but on Jim's as well. A forced crooked smile spread across the amateur artist's reddened face; "Ah-Hah, uh… so-sorry, it's just… just fuh-forget you, uh… ever saw that, whatever that was. It's just a stupid drawing, right? Ahah, yeah, just a… a-a dumb sketch! … C-Can we move on to those questions now?"

The strange display was beyond Father Andrei, who blinked and again, digressed back to the questions as Loona sat back down; sketchbook firmly in tow. Before the Priest could begin he turned and received his requested glass of water, thanking the young Mister Steele before reserving a few seconds for a drink.

Wiping his full beard from the droplets of water that may have settled, Father Andrei began; "So anyway, now that we can begin, I wanted to recall something with you that you apparently said to Father Aleksander. When you met him at the church, you said to him that you 'wanted to feel safe' in some way. Did that… have anything to do with what happened a few days ago, as in are they connected?"

Already stunned by the whole sketchbook episode barely a minute ago, Loona again found herself put on the spot. She froze where she sat and her mouth went agape; "Uh… Uhm, ah… Well, no, I mean— maybe? I-It's a whole, uh, 'thing' that's going on with me, at the moment."

"Understood. And what's this 'thing'," Father Andrei pressed lightly.

"Uh…" Still Loona's words failed her, and so did a believable cover story. She continued to dither on her words, until finally opting for the easiest option, if not the safest; "I-Is it alright if I don't talk about it right now? Like I can! I just, uh, need more time to… to think about it. Yanno what I mean..?"

The bearded Priest blinked; "Yeah, sure. Of course, I'm not forcing you to if that's the impression I'm giving. But if there's something going on where your life is in danger, you should probably go to the police about it."

"I… I don't think this is a thing they can deal with," Loona claimed, stretching out her sentence with much hesitancy to even let it be known. Of course the disguised hellhound knew full well it was a very suspicious answer, but it was the only feasible one she could come up with.

Father Andrei was left with no choice but to accept said answer. He slowly nodded in attentive acknowledgment to it, and continued without delay; “Do you care to tell me what happened last week? Before you came to us, and you passed out. Do you know who attacked you?”

Loona’s initial answer was a hard squint, but it quickly became verbal; “Listen, man. I dunno what kinda answer you’re tryna get from me, but whatever it is, I’m not gonna give it to ya. You said all this mad stuff about ‘not forcing me to speak’ and whatnot, but now you’re asking me this. Like c’mon what gives, can’t a woman have some privacy?”

“I’m just trying to help you,” Father Andrei insisted calmly.

“Yeah, well, you’re not,” Loona put it plainly; “In fact, with all due respect, you’re starting to get on my nerves. You came here to see if I'm fine, and you can see that I am, clear as day! Ta-daaa, still alive! If this was anyone else, they’d be gone by now.”

“Loona, come on,” Jim interjected.

The goth sighed, tilting her head towards the countryman; “What, I’m just saying! You know what I’m saying’s right, I’m right!

“Well listen,” Father Andrei intervened again, instantly gaining Loona’s less-than-eager attention; “If you want me to leave this terribly, I’ll leave. But before I do, I just want to relay to you something.”

Loona stared blankly after widely rolling her eyes; “And that is?”

“Like the questions, this is from Father Aleksander. He wants you at some time to come back up. From what he’s told me, he wants to speak to you again — in person.”

Astounded — that is exactly what Loona felt when she heard this, her bewildered expression telling the Priest as such. She couldn’t comprehend, for the life of her, what more that old man wanted from her. What was the point anyway; driving for thirty to forty minutes back up to that backwoods country city, only for a frail old man in funny black clothes to preach to her his infinite wisdom or whatnot!

For the millionth time Loona found herself stumbling over herself; “Why would I— huh?? Why does he—… Ugh!! You know what? Fine! If it means that you leave right now, sure! I’ll-I’ll go see him, some time. I dunno when, but I will. Maybe soon. That a good enough answer?”

“Yes, great answer,” was Father Andrei’s less enthusiastic reply, and he finally pulled himself up from the lounge chair. He began to make his way to the door, before he stopped and addressed Loona the final time that day; “Word of advice for you, uh, ‘Loona’. If you want to get anywhere with things, it’s best not to shut off the people trying to help you. Have a good morning.”

It was to this so-called ‘word of advice’ that Loona screwed her face up, watching speechlessly as the cassock-donned man let himself out. “The nerve…” Loona finally whispered, having held her speechless look for a little while; “The fucking nerve! D-Did you hear that, what he just said?”

“Yeah nah, I did,” Jim nodded, looking thoroughly unimpressed; “It’s called advice.”

The hellhound didn’t even attempt to hide her scoff; “Advice? Yo-You seriously call that advice? You’re actually fucking with me.”

“Mate to be fair, you were being rather shitty. Come on.”

“Duh! And for good reason, too!”

“And what’s that,” Jim pressed.

Loona’s face contorted with disbelief; “Oh come the fuck ON, you can’t be this thick! Jim, I’m a fucking hellhound — HELL-hound! You really think I’m going to get along with a…“ Just then it hit her, square in the face. Amidst all the absurdities was yet another absurdity; “Wait a fucking minute, why am I even explaining this to you?!”

“You didn’t have a problem a week ago when I took ya up there,” Jim duly pointed out, supporting himself on the fireplace’s top ledge; “What’s with the change?”

“Yeah, well that was then! That was before I was beaten within an-an inch of my life, because I couldn’t— I was too much of a fucking moron to realize that going there in the first place was a bad idea!” The gothic woman let her inner hellhound out through a snarl, throwing her head back hard into her designated lounge chair. Running a hand lengthways down her scowling face, Loona again snapped; “This is your fault.”

The bushman didn’t seem too phased by the accusation; “My fault?” If anything, Jim appeared mildly amused by the sudden assertion, the corners of his mouth fighting hard not to turn into a snicker.

“Yes! Your fault,” Loona barked once more, but hesitated hard and corrected herself; “…Well, it’s more my fault for even entertaining it. But you should’ve at the *least* said that going up there was a bad idea!”

In a slow lumber Jim headed for his now free lounge chair while Loona vented out her frustrations. He sat down with a sharp grunt and he twisted the chair around to roughly face who was effectively his housemate; his rather out of the ordinary housemate at that. The young bushman casually pointed a finger towards the still agitated Loona and said; “When we were about twenty minutes on the road, we stopped at a servo. You remember that? Do ya remember what I asked ya when we stopped by the pump?”

“If… If I was, uh… still sure about it,” Loona recalled slowly, her expression finally softening.

“Exactly,” Jim said; “And you went on to say that you were.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t sure!”

“So then why didja say you were sure?”

The goth sighed heavily, throwing her hands up in the air; “Dude, I don’t know! Well, yanno, we were already on our way, and-and I thought it’d be an asshole thing for me to suddenly go “Actually, I don’t wanna do this anymore, can we head back.” I was doing you a favor by not saying that.”

“Well it’s obvious that you weren’t doing yourself any favours,” Jim pointed out with all due respect; “Now ya’ve gotten yourself worked up about—”

“I’m not worked up, goddammit!” Loona suddenly snapped, then quickly tried to calm herself all over again. She clenched her fingers into a ball and squeezed hard, letting out a long strained grunt before relaxing. She stared up at the ceiling, longingly; “I just want to get back on my feet, again. … This babysitting job, this Friday. You think I’m gonna be okay?”

“Do ya know how to treat kids?”

The question made Loona seriously pause. She squinted like she was using all of her power to understand the query; “Like, as in… is this a trick question, what do you mean?”

Kindly Jim elaborated; “Like feeding them, looking after them, making sure they don’t get hurt,” he listed off one by one, spelling every aspect out; “That sort of thing.”

“…A… A general idea, yeah,” Loona carefully replied, really giving a thought about it, perhaps a little more than necessary; “But dude, come on, you know I’m not the babysitting type!”

“Little too late for that, innit,” the young man stated frankly, pursing his lips after saying as much.

In spite of all of her inner protest, Loona knew Jim was right — it was too late for second thoughts. The decision had been made; this hellhound was going to be a babysitter, and that was the end of that. All that she had to do now was to, effectively, suck it up.

“Hey. Can I ask for a favor?”

“Yeah, go on.”

“Can you, uh… with that boss of yours, call him sometime today. Just ask for a little more info, about this kid. I wanna know what to expect, just so I’m not left in the dark.”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“Huff— ‘Kay, thanks.” For a little bit Loona allowed the natural sounds of the outside world take over, an audible breeze rustling the large tree that was rooted a good few feet down the path. Even from here Loona could hear it, that’s how large and plentiful with vegetation it was. She began to fidget a little with her fingers, rapping against the armrests when she felt the urge to say something more. In due time, Loona entertained said urge; “Sorry for being shitty.”

“No worries,” Jim replied quietly, tilting his head towards his housemate; “But it’s not me who you gotta apologise to.”

To this Loona gulped; she knew full well who exactly he meant.

“Ah! Father,” the elderly Father Aleksander greeted promptly From the churchground’s garden bench, seeing Father Andrei approaching after a few hours of waiting, “And how did you get on?”

Father Andrei sat himself upon the wood and iron-framed bench, before then revealing just exactly how it ‘got on’. He let out a heavy breath, tiresome in nature; “It’s a wonder to me as to how… how do you say… ’difficult’. How difficult she is.” Discouragingly enough, he looked near dumbfounded at the woman subject to the talk at hand.

“Difficult you say,” Father Aleksander repeated which was phrased as a question, prodding the fellow Priest for an elaboration.

And an elaboration, Father Andrei certainly delivered; “She refuses to speak to me on normal terms. All that she gave me was at best abruptness, and at worse vigor. Can’t say I’ve witnessed anything like it, to be utmost honest with you. It’s bewildering.”

The optimist within Father Aleksander was discouraged when he heard this. “Well, that’s… No, that doesn’t sound good,” he wheezed, shifting his posture in the backrest of the admittedly lesser comfortable bench.

“Yes, very much so,” Father Andrei exhaled, looking out across the grounds; “It wasn’t very pleasant to be subject to, not at all. She agreed to come see you though, very reluctantly on condition that I left.”

”I see,” said the elderly Priest in a flat sort of demeanor. He looked with his colorful eyes up into the calm sky above, not a single aggressive cloud occupied that great vast blueness.

For a prolonged instance he gazed upwards, seeming to be deep in thought about who else but that strange girl and what her ‘problem’ was. He had met many people, most from his own people from which he hailed, but as well as those from others. Even with all of the people he had met, the experienced old theologian couldn't say he had met anyone quite like this ‘Loona’. A true outlier, highly fitting for said title.

Finally Father Aleksander came back to earth, blinking as he turned back to his younger counterpart. A sort of emotionless smile appeared, and he said; “All manner of people have different ways of processing things. That goes for you and for me, too. Her aggression, for whatever reason that may be, might very well be her way of coping. Is it good? No, not necessarily. But for the time being, that may be her method.”

“True. Very true,” came Father Andrei’s humble reply, finding himself agreeing with every word.

A brisk gentle breeze cut through the two clergymen, swirling around them and disturbing the relative stillness of the large tree overshadowing the greener grounds. The leaves rustled faintly, sounding like the faint shuffling of a large chorus of silk cloth, flapping and rippling against the winding wind which disappeared as quick as it came.

“Speaking of coping,” Father Andrei coughed, twisting himself a little to face his elder; “That Nikita, uh, Bordatsky. For him, do you think there’s anything we can do?”

For the first time that sit down, a faint feeling of uncertainty flickered as a resonance in his expression. His white-bristled brow wrinkled and he sat there, thinking deeply once more. “I’m certain there is, Andrei, I’m very sure,” the old Priest at last said; “What that is, however, I’m not too sure. Not yet. But God willing, it shall be soon.”

Father Andrei didn’t know what to say to this, finding it more suitable to respond with nothing at all, than respond with something futile in substance.

Nikita Bordatsky, for as long as Father Andrei could remember, had been a very “in-and-out” man from the day he moved in twenty years ago. The Russian community had heard of his name, and so had a few of the “outsider” locals in town, but nobody could say they had particularly spoken to him, or learnt anything more of him rather than his reclusive lifestyle was strangely admirable. Any interaction that anyone had with Nikita was usually very brief, if not outrightly dismissive. But that was if you were lucky; at worse, he would hurl all sorts of obscenities at you until you finally left his sharp one-eyed gaze. Attempts had been made to get through to Nikita, to have him come out of the self-imposed cave he had made himself; all which failed to bear fruit.

Topics on the hermit known as “the bear” aside, Father Andrei moved things steadily along; “So, Father. On the topic of matters of the church, I’ve been told the diocese has requested an annual report on the functions of our Parish.”

“Ah. Yes, as I expected,” Father Aleksander hummed quietly, sounding true to his claim of anticipation. Gently he flapped a reassuring hand; “I’ll get around to it, not to worry. The schedule this week has been very busy, but I’ll make room for—”

“Gentlemen!” — As a great shock came the shrill, shouting voice of a woman with an unmistakable American accent.

Both heads turned in unison towards the largely empty small car park, where lo and behold there was now a lone silver coupe. Stepping out of the car were two suited individuals; one of them a woman with short blonde hair and warm olive complexion, and the other a taller pale man with dark brown hair, combed back and set firm by a shiny lacquer of pomade. Their suits, more rather uniforms, were a pure matte black with maroon collars, all completed by a pair of sunglasses with a copious amount of tint — it was nothing short of a miracle that they could see where they were heading.

The loudest voice of the two again shouted out towards the two Priests, as the fair-skinned man locked the car behind them. “Excuse me gentlemen! Just a moment of your time, if you please,” the woman bellowed again, briskly striding towards the two cassock-donned men.

Father Aleksander took initiative as the head Priest of his Parish. “Hello there! Can I help you two,” he queried as he stood up, using the iron armrest as leverage to get back up on his feet.

“Oh I’m sure you can, good Sir! I’m sure you can,” the smartly dressed woman exclaimed, at last reaching talking distance before coming to a stop. She huffed and looked around the grounds, as though she was scanning the area behind her overly tinted glasses; “I have to apologize for our, uh, sudden intrusion upon your lives. But it’s not without reason! We come with some very important facts that we must tell you.”

The old theologian raised his brow; “Important you say? I barely… know who either of you are, and you mean to tell me you have important facts for me?”

“Perhaps my partner here is getting ahead of herself,” the pale suited man spoke up, his accent also distinctly American, having the underlying flair that suggested something along the lines of Bostonian. “We should introduce ourselves, as I’m sure is only appropriate. My name is Tom Yates, known to my partner here as ‘Agent One’, and she — to me, ‘Agent Two’ — is Beckie Saunders.”

“Well, ah… It’s, how say, wonderful to meet you two,” was Father Aleksander’s reply with an uncertain smile, though this more formal greeting was muddled with confusion as to who exactly these people were. “M-Might I ask what you two are here for? You have come so suddenly, and for important reasons as you’ve told me. Is there something wrong?”

The two apparent agents, at least they claimed to be, looked knowingly to each other before turning back to the bearded clergymen.

“Well we sure hope not,” so-titled ‘Agent Two’ said forebodingly, clasping her hands together in a ball; “I hope you don’t take us the wrong way, Father, when we tell you that we’re investigators into the supernatural. See we investigate paranormal phenomena of… certain kinds, as we have done so for five years within the United States of America, especially the Midwest and Western States.“

The coy nod that ‘Agent Two’ gave to ‘Agent One’ was his invitation to take the center stage. He obliged, just as proudly; “Only recently have we expanded our investigations internationally, so our business here is a ‘trial run’, if you will. If all goes to plan, we have all the intention to expand to the rest of Oceania, Europe, and beyond!”

“Interesting…” Father Aleksander muttered with a bewildered gaze, unsure of what to make of either of them. “So then what brings you here,” he queried, paying an ever-so brief glance to Father Andrei who looked just as confused.

“Well see, here’s the concerning part for you,” Agent Saunders said, at last getting to the point after her ear-nagging dual monologue. She paused a little for some ridiculous dramatic effect, then uttered; “Now I know that this is a place of utmost Holiness, as I’m more than positive that it is! But, I thought I’d ask just out of caution — have either of you fine gentlemen noticed any… strange happenings around these parts?”

The question, brimming rich with absurd nature, was met with a justified silence. And so the two Priests glanced at each other, shaking their heads in mutual agreement of one thing — these two were strange.

Questioning this time was Father Andrei; “Okay. By chance, is this some sort of performance,” he asked plainly, looking around to see if a camera crew also accompanied them; “Because if this is, I’ll tell you from now that we’re not playing along with it.”

But the charade, if this encounter ever was one to begin with, continued without hindrance.

It was Agent Yates’ turn to talk obnoxiously; “We hear you, Sir, but rest assured this is no stage play! We’re here on the basis that our best interests, that is yours and mine, are to be protected by all means necessary.” The agent’s shielded gaze seemed to drift from the two fellow sentient beings, and towards the great Holy colossus that loomed in the foreground. He gestured obviously towards it, giving off a thin smile; “Mind if we take a look inside? Just for a second of your time, we won’t be long.”

Father Andrei shook his head, still heavily distrusting the intentions of this true pair of oddities. He glanced to Father Aleksander who glanced back, the pair of them giving each other a hesitant nod before turning back to the apparent agents.

“Alright. But on some unnegotiable conditions,” Father Andrei hesitantly allowed, getting the pair to follow him as he fished keys from within his cassock. “Just please, treat the place with utmost respect. No funny business of any kind, that’s all we ask for.”

“Trust us, Father. You’ll have none from us, I promise. We’re agents of our word,” Agent Saunders assured with one hand on her heart and the other in the air, following the closest behind her guide. The look on her face, brimming with thinly veiled energy, displayed loud and clear that she was eager to investigate — for whatever reason.

The middle-aged Priest fiddled with the old iron key ring and picked out a key from the many that hung. He slotted the long iron master key into the lock, but took a moment to pause, and mull over whether the decision to let these two strange people in was a good idea. It was his Faith that they would respect the grounds that persuaded him to finally unlock the grand old Church, and with a dull metallic “clunk,” the tall brown double doors creaked open.

Fingers intertwined behind their backs, both ‘Agent One’ and ‘Agent Two’ wandered inside, looking curiously around at the Narthex decorated with impressive woodwork and Holy icons of various sizes and heights.

It was Agent Yates, taking off his tinted glasses, who hummed with great interest; “Hm! Very impressive place you have here, gentlemen. Very impressive…”

“Yes, it… very much is,” Father Andrei agreed, though was preoccupied with making sure that either of them didn’t wander too far off from his sight. Again he looked to his elder and silently signaled for him to watch them too, a task that Father Aleksander was already on board with.

The clearly eager, more energetic Agent Saunders was quicker on her feet, snooping around for whatever she hoped to find. Agent Yates on the other hand appeared more reserved, though greatly enthralled with the six-foot icons painted into the Narthex divider’s wood paneling.

The agent walked right up to one of these icons, and delicately ran a finger down the protective glass. He seemed to handle the exhibit with an adequate amount of respect, despite his eccentric abruptness from earlier. Rubbing his index and middle fingers together, he asked curiously; “So are these hand painted, Father?”

“Uh, yes. They are indeed,” Father Andrei informed in turn, the only time thus far he was pleased to answer one of the agent’s questions. He peered outside once again; thankfully there still was no camera crew.

“How old,” the agent pressed on with his curiosity, craning his head back towards the two Priests and he pocketed his sunglasses.

“About as old as the Church itself,” Father Andrei again answered; “So say around… almost a hundred years old, in fact. Because the Church was built in the nineteen-twenties when we came, so.”

An informed hum was the answer that Agent Yates gave, all the while he gazed into the painted eyes of the all-important figure that needed no introduction. By the sheer lack of motion, the younger priest of the two could tell that the suited man of dubious age seemed in a trance.

The Agent even said as much, with a light chuckle; “Hah- It’s like he’s looking right at you,” he claimed, pointing to the icon as he swiped a look back to the clergymen.

“More literal than you think,” Father Aleksander muttered subtly in Russian with a smirk. It was humorous yet serious comment that was only really meant for Father Andrei’s ears.

From somewhere inside the Church, beyond the Narthex was the faint echo of a device being powered on; a subtle electrical beep, followed by a whirr. Father Andrei marched off to investigate, finding who else but Agent Saunders in the center of the Nave, with a small rectangular device clasped in her grip. She hovered it around in the air, scanning the wide open space.

In a brisk step Father Andrei confronted the woman, causing her to spin around; “What are you doing,” he demanded.

“Just a brief scan,” declared Agent Saunders, sounding dismissive of the Priest’s earlier conditions. “Making sure there’s… no anomalies, hang on… mmmm, nope! Nothing detected. Excellent!”

A bizarre line to be sure, one that Father Andrei reacted accordingly to; “Nothing detect— okay listen. If you want to play Ghost Hunters, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. There’s an old railway station about ten minutes from here, go look there.”

The Agent raised an eyebrow from behind her sunglasses; “Who said we were hunting ghosts?” The smugness that radiated off her stunk to high heaven.

“Get. *Out,”* Father Andrei demanded emphatically in a low, enforcing tone — he had now truly had enough.

What occurred from there was a weirdly intense stare down, both Priest and self-described ‘Agent’ stuck in place where they stood, seemingly anticipating the other to make a move. Fortunately the

tension didn't build up to anything, and with a light sniff and an abrupt shut off of her device, Agent Saunders began to leave. Father Andrei closely followed her out, who once having reached the Narthex called to fellow Agent Yates, still admiring the iconography, to follow along.

She stopped just outside the entrance way, spun around on her polished high heels, and said to the two Priests; "Be careful out there, gentlemen! There's strange things afoot."

And thus, with this bizarre warning delivered, the Agents left without another word. They retreated back towards the car from which they came.

"Strange couple of folks," Father Aleksander quietly remarked, watching carefully as the silver coupe crawled away.

"Yes," Father Andrei agreed, peering just as intensely; "Very strange."

Father Dearest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

—=WEDNESDAY=—

Five minutes past midnight had just arrived, and Loona couldn't sleep. The so-called "Power Nap" she had earlier that afternoon had turned into a full five-hour sleep, waking up at the ripe old hour of seven at night. She didn't worry however, as Loona was no stranger to late-nighters, having done them more times than she'd like to admit for widely varying reasons.

Though she was no stranger to late-nighters, Loona felt as though this one was different this time around. While the others were for reasons such as partying, throwing up after said partying, or doing 'something' too fierce to mention, this midnight hour felt entirely within her control. No copious amounts of booze to chug, no bile to mop up, and no other bodily residue-covered clothes to throw into the laundry; just herself, on a veranda, with a bottle of the best whiskey and cola she had ever tasted. The brand was 'Jack Daniels No. 7', a serving that the gothic hound had "borrowed" from Jim's fridge, ice cold at that. No, she hasn't asked permission, but Loona in all her wisdom figured that she was entitled to one at most. Besides, Jim wasn't awake to ask — first come, first served.

All alone but at peace did Loona reside, leaning passively on the veranda's timber railing, in roughly the same spot she had seen the mourning dove. The warm hue of the wall-mounted light shone like a blanket on the fur of Loona's back, absorbing into her loose black pajama shirt that had the word *"NO"* printed on her chest.

Though at relative peace compared to the last few days, and the last of her bruises having vanished hours ago, she still thought of home — she thought of Blitz. It wasn't much a frequent thought as of late, having only emerged in tandem with Loona's improving health which permitted more thoughts than just "survive." She hadn't heard anything about what happened to him, or anything about him for that matter; not that she was allowed to. One thing Loona knew for sure was that Blitz wouldn't take this whole affair lightly; at best he would murder everyone in sight, and at worst would also make their families watch.

All in all she missed him. Despite it all, Loona yearned for home; she missed her bedroom, missed her job, her life. Her friends, her quirky little coffee shops, stylish occult, seeing other hellhounds — hell, she even missed Moxxie. Now there was a thought the hellhound figured she'd never have, unless a gun was put to her head.

Heavy was Loona's head as it fell forwards, the solitary young woman looking aimlessly towards the ground before taking another swig. She swallowed and quietly smacked her lips together, taking in the pleasant velvety taste of whiskey and cola; it sort of reminded Loona of liquorice. The bottle was now just about half empty, and in crept the feeling of tipsiness that she usually experienced with whiskey; she could down everything else without a problem, but for whatever reason it was whiskey that made her stagger.

To avoid flipping over the railing and thus making an idiot of herself, Loona stood as upright as she could and looked into the near pitch black horizon. The usual hills of vast fields and trees were all blanketed in that choking midnight darkness — who knew what crept out there under the veil of night. Slowly blinking Loona gazed into that darkness, then up at the night sky where countless stars peppered high above; she spotted the Southern Cross amongst it all. The stars reminded her of Octavia.

It was at this point in the midnight hour that Loona began to daydream, thoughtfully staring into the midnight-veiled country illuminated only by the moon above. The quietly thinking hellhound began to see a scene unfold, projected by her memory.

…

"You ever seen the night sky," the blurry figure sitting beside a younger Loona asked curiously, its silver form still wispy and unstable as she had last seen it.

The younger Loona, sporting her new red sweater, shook her head; "Not like this," she admitted, gazing up into the starry night, her red eyes glistening with wonder like the stars above.

Sadly the orphan was in fact telling the truth; she hadn't seen anything like the cosmic splendor she was now bearing witness to. Hell didn't have such things like the celestia surrounding the realm where mankind resided, its inferior equivalent being the murky, bland skies of each ring. The closest to this Loona could think of was the Lust ring, but even its night skies seldom gave comfort — there was no room for comfort, not for orphaned hellhounds like her.

A question popped into the younger Loona's little mind, and she asked; "Where did you say this was again? The city I mean, down there."

"We're over a place called 'Los Angeles'," the specter said; ***"It's not a… very attractive place, as you can see."***

"I don't mind," Loona mumbled in a soft barely audible tone, tucking her knees further up against herself until she was in a ball.

The figure and the orphan sat for a while together in muteness, and a small colony of crickets chirped somewhere nearby where the scrub was particularly thick. It gave Loona ample time to appreciate it all, a moment of freedom away where only bars and a shabby bed were all to look forward to. A yawn escaped the teenage hellhound's wide-open mouth, and she began to nod off.

"Tired, are we," the hazy silver figure asked, turning its featureless head towards the orphan.

Without a peep the poor teenage girl nodded, tucking her head into her knees after rubbing her eyes. "S-So how long are we gonna be here for," Loona timidly asked.

"Until he stops looking for you," the silvery figure said quietly.

The lowly orphan felt obligated to accept this answer. She looked down towards the city in the looming shadow of the mountain; "I hate this," she mumbled.

"What do you hate," the hazy figure beckoned, it's odd voice sounding mildly perplexed.

Loona's courage to speak failed her for a second, allowing the crickets to take over again. In due time though, she finally admitted what she so hated; "Life."

"Life isn't something to hate, Loona. It's a gift."

"Well it's a stupid gift!" The teenager slammed her fist into the ground, and tugged at the grass in frustration; "I hate it! I hate life, I hate people, I hate everything about it! There's nothing good in the world, you know this!"

In her anguish against the world, Loona scrunched the dirt and grass clump in her hand into a rough ball, then hurled it off the face of the mountain. It disintegrated mid-flight as it disappeared into the darkness below. The hellhound shot a dirty look back at the hazy specter's blank face, and jabbed a finger in its direction. Loona laughed humorlessly; "I-I know what you're tryna do. You're tryna get me to see beauty in the world, and-and life, and whatnot, when there's nothing of the sort! You're just like everyone else, tryna-trying to lie to my face. There's nothing for me, you know this. So just tell me the truth, admit that the world is trash!"

"But the sky, the stars. Isn't it beautiful?"

Loona was about to explode into another tandem, before catching herself and giving the night sky above another chance. She couldn't help herself; "…Yeah. Ye-Yeah it is, but so what?! The-The sky isn't the world, stars aren't the fucking world!"

"But it is, Loona," the specter soothed; ***"The stars are the world. Nature is the world, it really is. It's the best of the world."***

The teenage hound felt her anger subside as she looked back up to the stars, and at last she returned to realizing just how much she admired them. Loona's expression softened, and she felt remorse for the scorn she had said against them. In truth she did love the stars, above all else; it was her only solace.

As the poor orphan calmed herself, the gray wispy figure gave its wisdom; ***"There is beauty in the world, Loona, and you'll find it. But beside this beauty are cruel things. Just because the world is full of cruel things, doesn't mean you should hate the world itself. It's suffering, too."***

…

Exhaling heavily through her nose as the memory dissipated, Loona brought her focus back down to the earth, and gazed back down towards where the road was. The hellhound paused when she noticed a small orange light underneath the tall gum tree overlooking the long driveway. Sure enough, someone was within this light. Behold, it was a man, dressed in a white cloak camping at the girthy trunk's base, an arm perched above his raised knee. Further analysis proved that the light in question was a lantern, the flame dancing on its own free will. The figure in white seemed quite comfortable where he was.

Loona wasn't on the other hand, in fact she was less than thrilled. She was confused mostly, but nevertheless agitated that someone had the gall to camp out on a stranger's property like that. Being the only one awake, Loona took it upon herself to go investigate; but not before heading back inside to search for a flashlight. As she searched as quietly as possible, the hound tried to fathom just how exactly the figure had ended up where he was in the first place. Either she didn't see him at first, or he appeared out of literal thin air.

Eventually Loona did find a flashlight; a boxy red one she discovered lying underneath the kitchen sink. Now armed with a light, Loona marched back through the hallway and back onto the veranda, stopping just short of the short flight of stairs onto solid ground. She looked back down the gravel driveway; the figure was still there, having not moved like his presence was nobody's business. This would soon change.

Wasting no more time, Loona huffed and trudged down the steps, making great strides towards the intruder and his elegantly flickering lantern.

The hellhound called out, her voice shrill; "Hey! Hey, you can't be here!"

The figure didn't flinch.

Loona tried again, louder this time; "Hey, are you listening? I said you can't be here! You're gonna have to move, go elsewhere!"

Either the squatter was blind or purposely ignoring her, but either way he still didn't move. This agitated Loona to such an extent that she intended to throw the intruder out herself, assault charges be damned.

Now Loona was fully on the march, cracking the knuckles in her free hand; "Oh you wanna be difficult? I'll show ya difficult, asshole!"

Flicking on the light, Loona finally closed the distance between herself and the intruder, purposefully shining the beam right at the white figure's head — payback, if you will. The disgruntled hellhound stormed right up to the figure, but when she got as close as she was willing to get, her agitation subsided and she did a double take. She skidded to an abrupt halt, almost tripping over herself as she tried to figure out who exactly this was. Familiarity came to Loona when she noticed the full white beard extending down the man's face, the individual curled hairs in a natural pattern she had only seen on one other person.

The slouched figure gave his head leverage, and peeked up towards the flashlight-wielding hellhound towering over him. His curly white beard shifted with the smile he gave; “Quite the night, isn’t it,” the old man greeted.

His name blurted from Loona’s mouth, her memory serving her well; “Gunther! Gah— fuck sake, you creepy old man!” The gothic hound gasped for breath after her bout of surprise, placing hands on her knees while the adrenaline was expunged from her body.

This reaction was much entertainment to the ‘old man’, who wheezed with great laughter and leant back against the tree.

Hand firmly on her racing heart, Loona squinted hard at the white-clad figure; “Yeah, that’s it, laugh it out. Give me a goddamn heart attack, how hilarious, ho-ho-ho!”

Still the man of many years laughed, petering down once he began waving his hand, trying to excuse himself. Through wheezy breaths, the old so-called ‘Sub-Guardian’ choked out something in a language Loona didn’t recognize; it definitely wasn’t German. He finally spoke after composing himself; “Hah, I-I never thought you’d get so startled! If it meant preventing this fright of yours, I’d have come up myself.”

Loona grumbled at this and shook her head, the subsiding of her shock allowing to realize who now sat before her. “Ha-Hang on, wait, hold up,” she stumbled, attempting to speak; “How are you-… When didja-… You’re… here, in front of me, right now! This isn’t a dream, right? I’m-I’m not dreaming?”

The white-cloaked old man gave Loona a light-hearted look, and shook his head. “No, not this time,” he went to confirm, allowing himself to get back to his feet; “You’re not within the underworld anymore, so seeing you in person is thus no longer hindered.”

“Right, gotcha,” Loona uttered in a flat voice, taking the time to inspect the change in attire; “Say, you look… different,” she duly pointed out.

And indeed, he did appear different. As it turned out, the long white cloak was just that, and only went down to hip height, pulled together by a small gold chain buttoned together near the collar. The three-piece black and gray suit that Loona had last seen the elderly gentleman had also

disappeared, exchanged for a fine silk robe of light sandy brown. Around the robe's collar and shoulders, there were an array of embroidered gold triangular and circular patterns, and implanted within this were jewels of blue and red, carved into shapes of near impossible geometry. The gothic woman, standing idly before him, would be lying to herself if she said her mind wasn't boggled by it all.

'Gunther' acknowledged Loona's awareness, looking down upon his clothing before smiling; "I suppose I do," he spoke reservedly.

Loona squinted at the clothes, and the gears inside her head turned; "Is there a reason you're wearing all that? And please, don't tell me it involves me, I've had enough surprises for one week. For one lifetime…"

"Oh no, no! Nothing to do with you, not specifically," Gunther was unhesitant to assure, picking up the still flickering oil lantern from the ground; "See, these are the adornments that I wear on a more frequent occasion. More everyday wear, if you will."

Loona blinked with maintained confusion; "So your suit then, what's that to ya? Formal?"

"A change in wardrobe," Gunther stated, shrugging his shoulders. With the sudden movement within his grip, the oil lantern's comforting orange light grew momentarily brighter, flickering with heightened intensity before settling down as normal. "But come hither," the man from the elysium realm invited; "Do rest here for a short while. I believe we have much catching up to do."

Loona raised a brow, placing a hand on her hip; "And what makes you think that? There's nothing to talk about, at least not really."

The conversation promptly froze between both man and 'beast', the old man having refrained from answering immediately. Eventually he did; "You and I both know the facts are contrary," Gunther stated, giving Loona a knowing look.

He was right, very right; Loona of course already knew this, but didn't want to think about it. She tilted her head back and looked into the starlit sky, letting out a long, exacerbated breath. She knew she had to talk, in part out of obligation, and the other to let out her frustrations.

And thus, returning her head back upright, Loona spoke. She nodded her head, slowly; “Alright. You wanna talk? Sure, we’ll talk. Let me start off by saying that this whole thing, this whole little adventure you lot got me into? It’s ruined my life, completely.”

“What thing,” Gunther in turn asked.

Loona growled and bore her teeth; “Don’t play coy with me, you know what exactly I’m talking about. My life’s been turned completely on its head, and it’s all thanks to… well, me and my naivety! Like I should’ve known that speaking with you— no, ANY of you, would end with me getting caught!”

“As far as your actions are concerned,” Gunther began to reply; “It was you who decided that your appetite for investigation outweighed the risks, and the aforementioned risks were ones you were willing to take.”

The hound blinked slowly, looking very befuddled; “I’m gonna be honest, I didn’t get any of that. Can you… run that by me again?”

“This was your choice,” the elderly man said, simplifying his choice of words.

Loona was taken aback; “I— You’re saying this is my fault? Seriously, are you actually suggesting that to me, right now?”

“I’m saying this was your choice,” Gunther reiterated in emphasis, the signature calm demeanor to his speaking pattern subsiding for a moment of factual bluntness. And blunt he was; “Everything that you’ve embarked upon has been entirely within your freedom of choice. You are first and foremost a sentient, free-thinking being, and thus far everything has been entirely your free decision; the visits, your talks, your hunger to see more. Argue and protest about that all you like, but that is the truth; you know this well.”

As predicted, Loona certainly argued and protested; “Oh I get it, so it is my fault! Well I’m soh-ree for wanting to have a peek! Shit, if I knew I’d be punished for just having a look, I’d have never gone in the first place.”

“That’s not why you went,” Gunther politely rebuked.

The stubborn hellhound of course persisted; “Uhh, yeah, that is why!”

“No, it is not,” came forth Gunther’s now firm reply.

Loona shut up and stared with mild shock at the man, surprised at the change in attitude towards her.

The man of many years and much knowledge continued; “I recall that you said quite coherently to Father Aleksander that you ‘wanted to feel safe’. Furthermore, as I have heard, his younger counterpart Father Andrei asked you earlier today about what exactly you meant. You didn’t provide an answer. So I put forth to you that same exact inquiry.”

”Ohh, here we go, twenty questions,” Loona deplored crassly, but nevertheless answered. She threw her hands in the air, and sighed sharply; “I don’t know. No seriously, I’m being so real with you right now! I do not have the faintest fucking idea of what I meant. Guess I just, yanno, blurted it out in the heat of the moment. You know how you just do that sometimes?”

The visitor didn’t seem convinced, his next question making that assumption obvious; “What’s the real reason?”

Loona grew irritated; “What real reason, I already gave you the reason! What I said is the real reason, why don’t you believe me?”

“Because frankly, Loona, you’re a demon. I cannot believe you.”

It was these very words that cut deep into Loona’s very fiber. She became speechless when she heard them, her tongue deathly silent and her head ringing with the echo of realization; she was a demon. In truth the hellhound had almost completely forgotten about that simple fact, after having needed to pretend that she wasn’t for so long, and so often. Some nights post-Malloy, whenever she stayed up gazing up into the nothingness of her ceiling, Loona felt like she was denying herself; that feeling had only grown since.

“I cannot see why this is a shock to you, truly,” Gunther added, raising his eyebrows with feigned surprise.

“Because I’ve been having to live like I’m not,” Loona said dourly, gently nudging her foot into the ground; “Like I’m not a demon. Do you realize how hard that’s been for me? I want to kill, to feel the rush of beating someone to death like I used to. But I— But I’m in this situation where I can’t afford to do that anymore. Feels like I’m starving myself half the time, like an itch.”

Gunther allowed Loona to explain herself without interruption, and once she finished he quietly nodded, gravitating his attention up to the sky. Before long his eyes returned to the earth, and the look on his face vaguely suggested that he was contemplating. “No, that… that tends to happen,” the old gentleman pointed out.

“What does,” Loona asked in turn, tilting her head ever so slightly like she didn’t understand.

“When you deny something from yourself,” Gunther explained, turning back to the hellhound across from him; “Withdrawal is a very odious, powerful thing to overcome. It mighn’t feel bearable, but soon in time it will. Among other things, I am especially familiar with what was your profession, so I understand the intensity of your withdrawals. You could say my knowledge of the nature of your work has been for the longest time my own profession.”

“What does that mean,” Loona asked curiously, once again intrigued as to what he meant; she felt this would be a recurring thing, her lack of understanding that is.

Despite the question returned to him, Gunther didn’t acknowledge it, instead looking into the darkness of that tranquil starlit night. Loona in proper time also dropped the question herself, finding no use in either asking again, or having it answered. So she stood there, joining in the collective silence.

Eventually however, Gunther did speak again, but this time it was a different subject; “Something else troubles you, too. I can see it within you.”

“N-No? No, nothing else is bothering me,” Loona muttered, trying to play it off. She hoped beyond hope that he wouldn’t pursue this new interest.

But Gunther wasn't satisfied with this answer, cocking his head back towards the adjacent hellhound; "Your father."

A tingle ran up Loona's spine and her hairs stood upright.

"How the fuck do you know that," Loona demanded, giving the most intense side eye she had ever given.

"I have my ways," the old man assured with a faint smirk, giving no comfort to Loona if not intensifying her unease. "Do tell me about him. I invite you to."

"Psh, right," the gothic hound again moaned, deterred from speaking further by Gunther's apparent mind-reading abilities; "Ye-Yeah, as if I'm going to talk about him to you. You probably know plenty about him already, ya just want me to relay it to ya for some reason. Besides, what's there to talk about?"

"You tell me," was Gunther's simple reply, his attention now fully paid towards the young woman.

The young woman stared into the elderly figure's patient gaze, almost at a loss for words. "You're really gonna make me do this, arentcha," Loona groaned and griped, but her free decision dictated that she might as well; it wasn't like there was anything else to do.

The hellhound thought about her father for the second time that midnight; "So yeah. As you can probably guess, and already know, I miss him. Just like-… it's weird, man. Despite all the crap with him, and his stupid decisions half the time, I still love his dumbass, warts and all. Whether I like it or not, he's my old man; which sucks, because before him, I never had an 'old man' to begin with. This hellhound you're looking at now was just a sick little shelter girl that nobody wanted or gave a shit about; if they could do it legally, they would've left me to starve. Then Blitz and I crossed paths, found me in the pound, adopted me, blah blah blah… you know the story."

"That I do," Gunther lightly inputted, but allowed Loona to continue relatively uninterrupted.

For a spot to rest Loona opted for the large towering gumtree sheltering herself and the nightly visitor. She scooted beside the lamp-wielder and planted her back against the sturdy trunk, the bark lightly cracking from her weight. Folding her arms together, Loona continued to think; so much so that in emerged an almost forgotten memory.

She dithered on the decision to speak about it, but the decision to passively mention it prevailed. Loona's mouth fell open and she took a breath; "There was one other person though, before Blitz."

"And who was that," the ever-so inquisitive Gunther pressed, resting against the very same tree. Both his hands were free now as he had hung the oil lantern on a spindly, yet strong overhead branch.

Loona pouted, and tried to remember without much luck; "…No clue. I'm not lying either, I literally have no clue who it was. All I know is that they looked after me. Now I dunno if this is just my mind fucking up on me or not, but every time they came to see me, they were always… blurry? Like think of smoke, how it shifts around and all that. Pretty much how they were like, but with a very distinct 'person' shape. But their form was wavy, like it never stayed completely still; again, like smoke. Or fog, whatever you wanna compare it to, you get the idea."

At this point in her recollection, Loona paused to check on whether Gunther wanted to say anything himself, but all he did was gesture for her to keep going. "Right, okay," Loona muttered, and carried on in due course; "One of the things they did for me was take me to this one place. I liked it. Funny thing, found a friend up there when she ran away, around the same place. But they so much more as well; I had my first proper bath in a while because of them, new sweater and all.

"Sounds to me this person left an impression in your life," Gunther commented.

A reminiscent smile appeared on Loona's muzzle, soft and without an inkling of worry, but sadness; "Hah. Yeah, they sure did. Never even learnt their name." The end of this impromptu segment of this equally impromptu talk allowed her mind to gravitate back to something said earlier; it bothered her, a different kind of itch that hungered to know more.

Loona mustered the courage to speak up about it; "So what you said earlier, about knowing about my job. What did you mean by that?"

In ignorance of the repeated question, there came no satisfaction of a reply. This served only the itch, the one that Loona had which only grew more intense and demanding to be satisfied.

"Hey, please," Loona called just above a normal speaking flare; "C'mon, I asked a ques-…"

The hellhound froze when she rolled her head towards where the old man stood, finding him no longer there. He had disappeared, as well as the oil lantern, which vanished into thin air as soon as Loona realized she was alone. Now she was left in the dark, in quite the literal sense.

Under her breath, Loona muttered something along the lines of “typical,” and chose to remain by herself against the sturdy old gumtree. She didn’t even bother to turn her flashlight back on, finding the moonlight a suitable alternative. This time Loona didn’t think, giving her mind a much needed rest, instead letting what she saw in front and around do the “thinking” for her. It was dark, yes, but a nice, safe, reassuring dark. It reminded her of that Los first starry Angeles night, without the light pollution. The hellhound wished she had her guitar.

Right as she settled down, she just so happened to let her head tilt upwards, allowing her to notice something above her. Loona squinted at the unidentified thing in the dark, but in due time she realized what it was. High above her, perched in one of the trees was the same mourning dove she encountered way earlier. It was sleeping soundly, its head tucked up comfortably into its feathers.

“So that’s where you went…” Loona whispered faintly, not wanting to disturb the peace. She smirked at it, in envy of its peace, and just how simple it lived.

“How’s he looking,” Moxxie asked in a hushed manner, standing just outside the room, from where a heart rate monitor softly whirred.

The Doctor, a snaggle-toothed shark with a murky eye, drew a heavy breath. “It ain’t lookin’ good,” he admitted; “He’s no longer responding to stimulation, or words, barely an ounce of energy left in him. Reckon he’s got less than an hour left. The boys in there think so, too.”

The son of the old man beyond the door took his own deep breath, and sighed. It seemed that ’the time’ was coming, the sands trickling away at a steady, sure pace. Very soon, perhaps sooner than anticipated, the twisted crown forged from the blood of many fellow criminals was going to be passed on. Moxxie knew the time was coming, he always did; but now faced with it, he only wished that the old man could live forever — as a barely living husk for all he cared. Anything would suffice, as long as it meant that the crown would stay away from his own head; but as an only son, Moxxie seldom had a choice.

Faced with reality square in the face, Moxxie looked deeply into the doctor's eyes. "Do you think we should… you know," Moxxie sheepishly queried, then with his two fingers gestured towards his temple, his thumb acting as the hammer pulling downwards.

"It's up to you," the shark Doctor said quietly, shaking his head away from the responsibility; "He's your old man." The mannerism to which the significantly taller Doctor spoke suggested that he was afraid of the 'old man', even now as his body failed him.

The responsibility was greatly unwanted by Moxxie as well, who squirmed uncomfortably as he gazed at the door barely ajar. Beyond the door was where a blessing and a curse now lay dying; a blessing in the sense that the responsibility was 'his', but a curse in the fact that his son was his only rightful successor. In due time, within the hour, Moxxie's life as he knew it would be over; if it wasn't over to begin with.

Moxxie's mouth quivered open, flapping awkwardly a second before finally choking out; "Wh-What am I supposed to tell my wife? That I'm a mob boss now, pursuing my father's life? She-She's gonna flip when she finds out."

The Doctor didn't have an answer for the imp, and so remained silent and still. Moxxie didn't blame him for his lack of answer either, he understood the fear surrounding the Cognome family. Any wrong answer usually resulted in death, not that Moxxie would do so. But that's just how it was around those parts; either you provide a convincing answer they wanted to hear, or you shut up — that was Crimson's law. Depending on the requirements and Crimson's last will, it was soon to be Moxxie's.

Without much warning aside from approaching footsteps, the murky gray bedroom door nudged open with a feeble squeak. There stood Alessio, Crimson's right hand man of many faithful years, with a somber yet stoic look; "It's time," he simply said.

Moxxie knew exactly what he meant. He gave one final glance to the Doctor who nodded, then he stepped past the door and beyond the doorway — the point of no return.

The bedroom was completely darkened, save for the delicate orange lights of the bedside lamps illuminating either side of the bed. It was this very bed, surrounded by black-suited shark men with matching formal hats, where the now disheveled, feeble and weak mafia boss now lay, barely clinging to consciousness.

Moxxie couldn't quite believe what he was seeing, witnessing the man that had made his early life miserable for so long now reduced to nothing more than a cadaver drawing his final breaths. To someone who had never met this feeble old man before, they might have never believed that he had ruled over his slice of Greed for so long, if at all. But Moxxie knew he had, and a sizable part of him was thankful that a shameful chapter in his family's history was coming to a close.

Each one of the henchmen shuffled either way to let Moxxie in, giving him a spot to bid his final farewells to his largely absent father. A fearful lump formed in the ex-assassin imp's throat as he stared at his father, silently hoping that he would just die without him noticing he was there.

But that wish was left unanswered, when Crimson with a weak rattling breath, pried his wrinkled and bruised eyelids open. He peered at his son in a second of unfamiliarity, but in no time he recognized who it was. A smile crept along his crooked, parched lips; "Kn-Knew you'd finally come-," Crimson choked out, forcing every syllable; "H-Hah.. Was- Was only a mattuh o'… of time, huh?"

"M-Maybe so," Moxxie quivered, trying to hide his timidness and fear.

The smile that Crimson bore turned into a weak frown, noticing the weakness that his disappointment of a son withheld. "Y-You're gonna be boss soon," he coughed; "Ya-Ya can't be all… chickenshit— like you're actin' now. Ya need tuh… tuh- man the fuck- up…" Like a crooked branch, Crimson extended his now skeletal arm up towards Moxxie, and pointed a ghastly finger; "That pussy shit'll getcha killed out there. Duh-Don't push it-…"

This time Moxxie didn't say anything — he didn't dare to. All in all, he just wanted this to be over and done with.

The side of Crimson's face closest to the constantly beeping heart monitor jittered, and he weakly scowled towards it. "Dammit, turn that fuckin' thing off," he demanded with a raised brittle hand, his wish being duly fulfilled.

Utter silence now filled the air, save for the Cognome family's paternal figure's increasingly labored breathing. Each breath he took now had a distinct rattle; his time had almost come.

"Th-That's bettuh," Crimson wheezed, the dark circles underneath his eyes seeming to grow darker by the second. Again he focused his glare back to Moxxie, squinting at him with both fatigue and the last remnants of his sharp, sinister wit. "Nuh-Now you listen here, boy," he hissed, his breath

again turning into a rattle; “Ya gonna have a… hu-whole lotta responsibility on those— shoulders of yours when I’m gone. It’sh gonna be tough, very fuckin’ tough. … Now if it was my choice, ah’d live forevuh and keep ya fro-… hah-from ruining my empire. But shee, it ain’t my choice anymore, now is it? An’ from that pathetic look on yuh face, I can tell it ain’t yours either.”

When Moxxie tried to look away, Crimson grew angry; “Look at me, you little shit! Y-You look at your old man.” Satisfied that he had gotten his son’s attention back, the dying mafia boss grinned and continued as planned; “Good. Now listen, an’ you read my lips… hah-carefully-. You end up doin’ anything to sabotage my hard work… I swear, I’ll come haunt your pathetic ass. Trus—Trust me, boy— *AHEM!* — Y-You’ll see me.”

‘The boy’ tried not to show his fear in the presence of his fear-sustained father, but even that sustenance couldn’t save Crimson Cognome from death. “I-I’ll see you then,” Moxxie choked out, gazing deeply into his father’s exhausted eyes.

Crimson let out a thin, broken grin; “You bet,” he wheezed faintly, using all that remained of his breath to form these two words.

These were to be Crimson’s final words it seemed, as the mob boss remained deathly mute from that point on. His stare was loud however, jabbing deeply into the fiber of Moxxie’s being, as the eyes that withheld so much hatred and malice began to fade. Slowly Crimson’s chest fell downwards, his final breath having been drawn, and those yellow eyes of his at long last faded, and faded… and faded… until death finally took hold.

And with that, according to Crimson’s will, the crown changed hands.

A distinct voice echoed from outside in the hallway, beyond the closed door; *“Is he dead yet?”* The voice sounded impatient, completely uncaring for any foreign concept like “mourning.”

Nobody answered as the bedsheet was pulled over Crimson’s now lifeless body, his lifeless face vanishing behind a veil of white.

“Mooooh—xiiieee! I’m talkin’ to yaaaa, specificallyyyy,” the voice again echoed, increasing in volume to a bellow; “Is that old man dead or not?”

Moxxie stared blankly at the shrouded corpse in the bed; “Ye-Yeah. … He-He’s dead,” Moxxie squeaked out to the voice, as deep heavy footsteps lumbered to the door.

“Ah, fucken finally!” The door was swung open widely, colliding with the wall it was bolted to with a loud bang. Squeezing his rotund frame through the doorway was Mammon, dressed in his pinstripe suit, the bold dome of his head clear for all to see.

Mammon didn’t care for things like proper form as he stumbled into the room, his massive footsteps shaking the bed that Crimson’s lifeless body lay. The sheets covering the cadaver twisted with the brash movement, the ex-mob boss’ dead arm falling off the side of the bed as a result. For whatever reason the Sin of Greed — who for whatever reason stank of whiskey — didn’t seem convinced of Moxxie’s word, and with one ungracious sweep he tugged the veil away from Crimson’s face.

The Sin peered dead-eyed at the corpse, waiting a few seconds, but sure enough Crimson was as dead as a doornail. “Ohh, thank fuck for that,” Mammon blurted out, lazily throwing the veil back on; “Thought the ol’ bastard would nevah die! Yanno he’s gotta have his stupid fucken monologue, yadda-yadda, so on and so forth, and only THEN can he die! Farkin ‘ell… he was determined, I’ll give ya’s that!”

The mafia demons didn’t dare say a word, though their faces were mixed between mourning, anger, or in Alessio’s case no emotion at all.

Mammon grunted in dismissal at the lack of reaction and turned to the heir just beside him; “Ahh, fuck me, I’m sorry for ya loss, little man. He-He was a good, uh… caring… ah fucken— honourable man of much, er… fathership. Or whatever the fuck, who knows, who cares! Anyway! You an’ I have got some business to get down to, once we rid of that sack in the bed there.”

“Not yet.” — Everyone stopped and turned to the one tall shark demon that dared speak against Mammon’s indirect order; Alessio.

“Wha-… W-What was that, sorry,” Mammon asked cluelessly, his speech slightly slurred and borderline incomprehensible. The aroma of whiskey grew more potent as he spoke.

“We’re not moving him yet,” Crimson’s right hand man repeated; “Let him rest for an hour. Then we’ll bury him.”

The Sin was taken aback; “Rest? Mate, ya boss is dead as dogshit! Look at ’im! Y-Ya not gonna— Don’t make me rip off his fucken bedsheet again just to show ya!”

“We’re letting him rest,” Alessio spoke again, his resolve ironclad and as stern as his eagle-eyed glare. He appeared almost defiant of the bulbous, centuries-old Sin who could most likely kill him in a fight; this didn’t seem to matter to Crimson’s most loyal guardsman.

Mammon couldn’t believe what he was hearing, letting out a few squeaks of protest before grunting with capitulation; he had no choice but to let Crimson ‘rest’. “Urgh, ya sacks o’ fish shit,” he gurgled in a low growl, then nudged Moxxie firmly on the shoulder; “‘Mon, Moxxie! We got somethin’ to discuss, just you an’ me.”

Moxxie didn’t have a chance to speak before Mammon began lumbering back out into the hallway. Left with the options to either stay with his father’s corpse or go elsewhere, the imp chose the latter, leaving his new brood of henchmen behind.

The newly-minted mafia boss nearly tripped as he gingerly followed. “Where are we going,” he called out with unsure words, glancing back to his henchmen one last time from outside.

“Just down here, to that big fuck-off living room ya late dad has! Somewhere a lil more comfortable for ya. Aftah all, losin’ ya old man isn’t a-a light thing to process.” This was less phrased as a gesture of sympathy from Mammon, and more like he expected the notion to be agreed with, or else. The death glare the Sin gave when he looked back at the trailing imp told the lesser being as much.

Moxxie gulped, knowing that there was only one right answer; “Oh, yeah. It’s um… it’s a lot to take in, for sure.”

In consideration to Moxxie’s reply, Mammon remained eerily quiet as he hobbled down the hallway, approaching the flight of stairs down to the ground floor. “I feel sorry for ya, little man,” Mammon bellowed as he shuffled down the wide stairs; “Got all of this responsibility on ya shoulders now! I can tell ya from experience, matey, this sorta thing’s no light feat.”

“I figured as much,” Moxxie bemoaned as he followed slowly behind, watching Mammon’s humongous suited frame shift unevenly as he reached the ground floor.

The bulky ruler grunted as his polished dress shoes collided with the ground floor with a clack. “Yanno Mox’,” he began, bringing out a nickname he had used since forever; “Before ya ol’ man kicked it just now, he an’ I spoke a lot about ya.”

“Is that right,” Moxxie asked unenthusiastically, delivering it in no more than a barely audible mumble.

“Nah, true! Without a word of a lie,” Mammon grinned, his hearing having served him well; “Now he wasn’t all that supportive, unfortunately. You an’ I both know that, and to your old uncle Mam’ here, that’s a big fat shame! I always rooted for ya, aftah all these years, even after ya left with that petite Wrath wife of yours.”

Moxxie sneered as he continued to saunter behind; “She Has a name, thank you very much.”

“Oh I know, I know! But hey, she’s another story, we’re speakin’ bizz for the moment. Now Crimson and I, we made a deal that I intend to keep; as soon as he passed, he wanted me to… well, help you along!”

Both imp and Sin were on the home stretch to the living room, the wide open entrance in plain sight, getting ever closer. Mammon continued to ramble; “To acquire power an’ to earn respect in Greed, ya need a little speck o’ leverage. So with that little thing in mind, I wantcha to meet a friend o’ mine.”

The news of a handpicked third party by ‘your truly’ made Moxxie brace for impact, slowing to a near stop while Mammon charged ahead.

Disappearing around the entranceway and out of sight, Mammon burst into a greeting; “Hermann! Ya big ol’ bastard, how ya going?”

“Very well, Mein Herr! Very well,” a second voice chimed in, speaking quite fondly to the embodiment of Greed.

“Say who now?” — Moxxie raised a brow and scooted to the outskirts of the living room, poking his head around to find Mammon with another ‘big’ figure.

This ‘Hermann’, who turned out to be a Sinner, was indeed a ‘big ol’ bastard’, both in stature and waist. His outfit was a military uniform of light bluish-gray, both his double-breasted jacket and dress trousers ironed and pressed to an exceptionally high standard. As crimson as a beetroot was the Sinner’s round face, such was the Sinner’s skin pigmentation and not as an example of widespread lupus or catastrophic liver failure. Still, this ‘Hermann’s’ exquisitely combed hair made up for any unsightly appearance his face may present. What was definitely a sight however, was the deep rope burn implanted around the plump skin of his upper neck; it dug deep, a grotesque rope-etched trench carved into his inflamed flesh.

The newly-crowned mob boss hadn’t been there a whole five seconds, and already Mammon had noticed the talk of the town coming to join him and his ‘old friend’. “Ayy, there he is! Man o’ the hour,” Mammon blurted out, hyping up the arrival.

Shortly after came the attention of the living beetroot, his sickly eyes locking onto the short-statured heir. Safe to say he looked mildly disappointed. He sounded so, too; “And this is the heir, Herr Mammon? This is a pretending servant or an amateur aristocrat, absolutely nothing akin to a heir.”

Moxxie didn’t know whether to feel insulted or relieved — perhaps both.

“Ah shit, lay off him Hermann! Have a bitta faith,” Mammon pleaded to the Sinner like an old friend. He grabbed Moxxie by the cheeks and pinched; “Look at him, he’s got potential! I’m telling ya, he’ll be MILES bettah than the dead don up there, trust me on this one!”

“Blind trust isn’t a luxury I can afford, and neither can you,” was the Sinner’s less than flattering response.

“Wait, sho,” Moxxie piped up from between Mammon’s fingers, his cheeks still tautly pinched; “How do you chu know eachosher..?”

The two superiors paused and looked down at the scrawny red being. The interjection came as a surprise to them both, and neither of them knew what to answer with.

In the end it was Mammon who was forced to reveal his dirty secrets. “Well, err-, haha! Ya see Moxxie,” he began like he was about to lecture, still groping the poor imp’s face; “When ya’ve been around for as long as I have, ya tend to meet people through the means of money and such. Right? Me and Goering ‘ere, we go waaaay back! It’s a long fucken story, yanno, involves going up to the human world an’ all that shit, throwing around support ’ere and there where we see fit. All that good crap, used to do it all the time!”

“And opium,” Hermann whispered with a broad smirk.

“…Rightsh,” Moxxie mumbled from behind his impaired mouth, squished together by Mammon’s vice grip; “Ah-And how long’sh thish been goingsh fuh?”

Mammon actually had to use his brain for this question, the rusted gears in his head ticking over for the first time in eons. “Ehh… Ough, I think… Well I started in nineteen-twenty-three, human realm years… So… I’d say ’s been ’bout a hundred years now!”

“He appeared to me as a fat, clean-faced businessman,” Hermann added his recollection, chuckling between syllables; “I remember it vividly! Came to me after a party meeting that same year, expressing interest in what we were doing. The money was much needed in those early years. Who’d have guessed that jolly “Berliner” would be the Lord of Greed himself!”

Moxxie rolled his eyes; “Yesh yesh, happy memoriesh— Can you stop shqueezhing my facesh pleash?” Mammon obliged in an uncharacteristic show of mercy. “Thank you. And I take it you’ll be in my ear, mister…”

“No no, no ‘misters’ here,” the Sinner waved off; “Just call me Hermann.”

“Oh. Okay, noted,” Moxxie uttered, straightening out his jacket; “So from what I’m hearing, you’re going to be my… courtier, advisor?”

“I wouldn’t say that, no,” Hermann corrected; “Think of me as an ear from a position of power. A friend, with the benefit of backing.”

Mammon chimed in, as he couldn’t help himself; “Ya’ve got both of us, Mox’. Anything ya need, it’ll be our pleasure to give it to ya. If ya need anything from us too, give us a shout!”

The warmth and words of support from both tall and portly men, whether genuine or otherwise, didn't seem to be returned from Moxxie who looked to them with great unnerve. It was bad enough that Mammon was in his ear, but the addition of this 'Hermann' being a second devil on his shoulder forebode even more bad news — and there was no angel in sight.

"Might I add," Hermann spoke up again, scratching the embedded rope burn around his neck; "Thinking further on it, I might have misjudged you in your competency. Your delivery of Supplementum Pellis a few days ago has come to Mammon here's greatest pleasure. I too understand that Their Lordships, the King of Hades and the Queen of Gluttony, are too very pleased with your supply. It shall last them five months. Because of this, they wanted me to thank you for your commitment to duty."

"It's my pleasure," Moxxie muttered in a painful absence of enthusiasm or pride — if anything he felt ashamed. Speaking of said supply, the imp followed up with a question; "Say, what's in that stuff? Wha-What's it made of?"

Mammon and Hermann suddenly grew hesitant to speak, exchanging mute stone-faced glances. "Yeah, sorry mate. That's not for ya to know," Mammon in turn said, refusing to elaborate further.

Moxxie felt inclined to accept this answer, shifting his mind to the then and now as business talks began, his first act as head of the Cognome Family. First order of business: money, and power sharing. Thoughts of home, and of Millie, began to fade away.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, this is the author!

If you've made it this far, that means you have reached around the halfway mark of this part of the Stranded Hound Series. Thank you so much for your support!

Because this is the halfway mark, I'm pleased to announce that I've made a Discord server specifically for the purposes of an upcoming Q&A! This will give you the opportunity to ask the questions you might have about the fanfic, and I will also reveal a few smaller details that I will talk about — these however will be considerably spoiler free.

Discord Link: https://discord.gg/z2JP7FSV

Thank you all for reading!

Interests, Ever Conflicting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Greetings and salutations to all who join me this morning on this program! I am your presenter, Edwin E. Screwtape, and I am here to provide to you all the latest in and around the darkest depths of Hades. From the poverty-struck dwellings of Pride, to the eerily calm waters of Envy where something doesn’t seem quite right, I am here to provide you with the facts, and the facts only. This morning on this program, I am pleased to say that today marks thirty-five years to the date of my premiere broadcast to you all Hades-wide. To all of you who have joined me since day one, you have my deepest gratitude for sticking with me for so long; but if you are a newer listener, I'd still like to thank you, dear listener, for giving this aging imp the time of day. The time is currently eight-fifty-one, and the daily forecast is suggesting a storm affecting Pride and Wrath as the morning progresses. So by all means, to my loyal listeners in these two rings, don’t get yourselves too wet.”

“And now, here’s the news. Another victim of the heinous terror attack at the Damnation Theatre last week has died this morning. Five-hundred-and-two year-old Countess Broodloom Peele of Greed was pronounced dead at five-fifteen, after being randomly shot at by thirty-four year-old Blitzo Buckzo. She was rushed to hospital and put on life support last week, but the decision to shut down was made by her family on advice of physicians within the last few hours. Her family is understood to be in a week-long period of mourning.”

“Another victim of the crazed imp’s murderous rampage was Verosika Mayday. In positive news from this unseemly event, she was discharged from hospital just this morning and is understood to be ‘doing rather well’. Upon being asked about what she thought were the motives of the attack, Verosika emphatically declined to comment.”

“Tensions are understood to be high between the Queen of Gluttony and the Lord of Greed, amidst new negotiations. This comes after a series of disagreements between Their Lordships, surrounding the distribution of finances, issues with homelessness, displaced peoples from Greed into Gluttony, and vice versa, and the ongoing crime epidemic affecting both rings. Negotiations are being renewed today, with prominent Sinner Overlords from both rings understood to be in attendance. Word on the ground suggests that Gluttony’s Interior and Inter-Rings Minister, Oleg Golov, will meet with Greed’s counterpart, Joachim Ribbentrop, alongside Their Lordships. The negotiations are expected to last several hours.”

“Further news from Gluttony, as according to our most reliable sources, Her Lordship Queen Bee is going mad! Yes, ladies and gentlemen, you have heard right. According to my interior source, as a result of the aforementioned circumstances which have caused her near unbearable stress, Her Lordship is believed to be suffering the onset of a mental crisis. Our thoughts are indeed with her.

To speak further on these recent internal developments within the United Realms, I have here with me in the studio a very special guest. With me is the King of Hades' Head of Security, and leader of the Shoktrup organisation, Hermann Oberon Ritter. Mister Ritter, thank you for joining us."

"Thank you, Herr Screwtape, it is my pleasure."

"My first question for you, Mister Ritter, is the upcoming negotiations today between the Lord of Greed and the Queen of Gluttony. Can you explain to us why these are happening, and the expected outcome?"

"Well you see, good Sir, vith anything that involves internal political matters, you tend to come across snares zhat momentarily compromise the easy flow of zhings. Vhat we are seeing is nothing too out of zhe ordinary, especially vith such an internally diverse system such as the United Realms. Of course, for zhose who are outsiders to this sort of menial political squabble, it is a disturbing zhing. But I'd like to rest assure zhat both parties, that is Zheir Lordships, are more than villing to negotiate. We expect zhat zhe outcome vill be favorable for both parties, as per mein sources."

"That is indeed very assuring, Mister Ritter, I'm glad to hear. I am sure all of my listeners are glad to hear this, as well. But as I'm sure as you might've heard, being the Head of Security, that the public are concerned about the ongoing stability of the United Realms. A-Amongst all of these concerns, some are suggesting that with all of these conflicting interests from different parties over the past few years, this might come to a.. negative turning point and result in a civil war. What do you say to this?"

"Respectfully, I say zhat these worries are very much unfounded. What zhis sort of reservation comes from is a considerable lack of faith zhat borders being classified as hysteria. I'm nicht implying that zhese people are inherently hysterical, of course not. But at the same time, zhe wider volk out there should be careful in falling so easily for naysayings. What we have in zhe United Realms of Hades is a robust, foolproof, thousand-year-old governing system zhat ensures the continued stability and unity of the rings. This system vill continue to work with utmost efficiency — Zhis is all zhe volk needs to know."

"So as I understand it, Sir, you're implying that the people spreading these concerns are, say, troublemakers?"

"Everyone out there spreading zhese concerns among zhe volk have their intentions; some genuine, some ill-intended. Throughout history, both here in Hades und up in zhe living realm, this has been a constant, an unfortunate guarantee in any organised society. Fortunately it has been zhe wider

volk that in the end have trusted us with responsibility, und in zhat trust we have been able to deliver. Whilst, nein, I don't blame everyone for being concerned — why would I — but I do blame zhe ill-intentioned for this round of anxieties."

"Well, indeed, let's hope the outcome will be in stability's favour. According to the reports we have heard, there will be some high profile Sinner Overlords around the negotiation table. Can you clarify who these are?"

"I would be incredibly honoured to do so. Who ve have on zhe diplomatic mission from Greed are two prominent figures with such integrity it vould make you sick. Joachim von Ribbentrop, who you know as Greed's Minister for Interior und Inter-Rings Affairs, is a well-seasoned diplomat who worked extensively for zhe benefit of our Vaterland. We also have Hermann Goering, His Lordship zhe Lord of Greed's courtier, whose expertise in matters of Aristocracy are vast und unrivaled."

"But as we understand it, the Queen of Gluttony has her own court of Ministers. Their lives in the living world are understood to be a point of contention for the aforementioned Greed diplomats."

"Yes, unfortunately. In life, Herr Golov was a commissar for the Soviet Union's NKVD under Stalin. For whatever reason, Her Lordship Queen Bee has appointed him on grounds of his, und I quote, 'reliability'. Vhat this means exactly is beyond my comprehension, but I suppose we vill find out in the fullness of time."

"Well as we do know from past appointments to Her Lordship's cabinets, analysts have said that she does seem to have a.. preference for certain leanings. Would I, and my audience, be right to assume this is the case?"

"I wouldn't necessarily go zhat far, Herr Screwtape, but it certainly is somezhing to keep an eye on. But again, I do not expect zhis to affect any outcome of the negotiations."

"We shall hope, Sir. Ahem- Whilst on the topic of the past, I do recall a radio interview you sat down on hosted by Alastor, a good long-time friend of mine in the radio show industry. You might recall this interview, where you said upon your appointment as Head of Security that you are a, and I quote: "Revolutionary by all means, even against revolutions." May I ask what you meant?"

"To understand vhat I meant, you must first understand the basis of what is not only mein own, but also zhe Shoktrup's philosophy. Our understanding of how zhings are, how zhings truly work, comes from years of experience, bringing us forth to zhe conclusion zhat the old systems were no

longer fit for purpose. We understood in life, those of us who made our mark before zhe Shoktrup, that a new system needed to be built, with charismatic leadership zhat had zhe villpower to bring us forward."

"What does zhis mean? We must go back to where I started, just a low-class young man from zhe Rhineland, who just missed out on serving his Vaterland. Zhe Great War, or as I know it as der Grosse Krieg, hadn't gone in our favour. Zhe English and zhe French had defeated the Kaiserreich, putting upon us a series of humiliating conditions. Und thus, Deutschland was in severe strife; both internal und external. Der Kaiser had failed us, his generals left pessimistic, and zhe volk? They were left to the scavengers — Anarchists; Spartacists; even Bolsheviks to zhe east seeping through the charred remains of zhe shattered First Russian Republic, and trying to create devastation in every other part of Europe. They wouldn't stop at Warsaw."

"In response to zhese new challenges, these novel threats, people became proactive. Ragtag groups of militias and paramilitaries made up of veterans from der Grosse Krieg, fought with blood and bone against zhese new destructive forces, vith results strongly in their favour. Relentlessly through the twenties zhey fought, und in many respects, they saved der Vaterland; but this to us wasn't enough. To zhe volk, this wasn't enough, because in the end even these veterans still believed in zhe failed old system. Because of this, they too became as much a traitor as zhe troublemaking red revolutionaries. We couldn't have zhis, so vhen our rightful revolution in the following decade came to pass… we sorted them out swiftly."

"This is vhat I meant when I said I am a revolutionary. When I joined zhe new Worker's Party in nineteen-twenty-one living realm years, I already understood zhese basic, undeniable facts; that only somezhing new would pave the way forward. Zhose who vould join us later on came to this truthful realisation as well. But I, amongst a few others, vere zhe first."

"Now, Mister Ritter. What you've just told me might suggest to my listeners out there that you intend to completely change the system, the same one that you just spent minutes praising earlier on. Could you clarify your statements, and what your explanation all meant in a nutshell?"

"How do you mean? You're not suggesting zhat I vould betray the system I've fought so tirelessly to protect, are you?"

"Well, I— No, Sir, not at all. I was just asking on behalf of my audience what you meant."

"I am more than certain zhat your lovely audience understood my meaning. None of zhe statements I have made contradict any of my true opinions. My loyalty is to zhe state, and my conviction tells

me that zhe judgement of said state is entirely within what zhe Shoktrup finds beyond satisfactory. To put it mildly, I vouldn't be the Head of Security of All-Hades if I didn't believe in zhe state."

"No, Sir, that is a very good point."

"Quite."

"Going back to the topic of Her Lordship, the Queen of Gluttony, I wanted to inquire on behalf of my audience surrounding the rumours that she has apparently 'gone mad'."

"Ja?"

"Well, I'd like to ask from your insight's perspective what you make of these rumours. Do they have any basis in reality, or what's going on there?"

"What's going on zhere is exactly what you just called it; rumours. What zhese are simply are rumours, und rumours that help nobody in an already precarious situation. As you said earlier in zhe beginning of the program, this rumour emerged alongside news of today's negotiations. It's zhe work of naysayers who wish desperately for something terrible to happen to the mechanisms of zhe state, the unity that binds zhe United Realms. Frankly zhis sort of talk is dangerous, und shouldn't be entertained within any capacity."

"Have you spoken to her?"

"I speak extensively to her. She is fine. Zhat is all I have to say, und zhat is all you und your audience need to know."

"Understood, Sir, thank you for assuring us. Well unfortunately that is all the time we have left for this segment, so thank you for joining us, Mister Ritter."

"It's been an honour, danke."

“Ladies and Gentlemen, that was the Head of Security of All-Hades and Kommandant of the Shoktrup organisation, Hermann Oberon Ritter. Thank you for listening, and I’ll be back with you after this break.”

Eagerly waiting by the prime entrance of the Grand Palace of Gluttony was the ring’s Sinner Interior Minister. The wooden pipe he smoked gently belched wisps of tobacco smoke as he took another puff, smoke escaping through the splintered cracks of his lips.

This tall, slender figure was the Queen of Gluttony’s Interior and Inter-Rings Minister, Oleg Golov, a true specimen of one of the most feared Overlord Sinners throughout Hades. A man that couldn’t let go of his yesteryear profession, he had opted to return back into the seats of government in any way he could — of course, with the help of a very powerful ally.

He looked quite the part for a Sinner, too, with a sort of face not even a mother could love. Unlike most other Sinners of his type with their faces of vantablack or scarlet red, Minister Golov’s face was a clammy, ghostly gray as if he had been sponged of blood. As a result his skin too was cracked like a riverbank in drought, leaving his face to become abundant with dry, flaky ravines for wrinkles. His nose, long and narrow, stretched downwards to a sharp triangular point just above his painfully cracked lips, the bridge of this same nose dividing his yellowed eyes sheltered beneath a droopy brow of abundant folds. Fellow Sinners, imps, and hellhounds alike often remarked how it was a miracle that Golov’s perpetually frowning face hadn’t disintegrated or completely fallen off; behind his back, of course.

The only thing that didn’t look dead on this specimen was his suit. Golov’s custom tailored three-piece black suit was immaculate and clean, decorated around the cuffs of both dress coat and trousers with a thin yellow band as a border. A badge was sewn to the coat’s left collar, the Queen of Gluttony’s personal insignia framed in a golden hexagon. Beside it was Golov’s own personal addition; the pin. More specifically it was not of Hades-based origin, but of the living realm; a badge of the Communist Party of The Soviet Union, one that he had taken to the grave. Nothing could shake him from honoring his past.

Minister Golov’s boney fingers cupped his pipe as he lowered it from his mouth, dispensing the spent ashes onto the floor and crushing them with a shoe. Once having stowed his wooden pipe away, the sickly gray man clasped his hands behind his back, and continued to wait patiently in vain for the expected arrival; but this patience was depleting post-haste.

To the sound of small approaching footsteps behind him, Minister Golov turned to see a small hellhound approaching, one that had the appearance of a Staffordshire Bull Terrier. She was dressed in a suit much like his own.

He acknowledged the small, smartly-dressed servant to the Queen of Gluttony with a pressing question; “Any news,” Minister Golov asked, his voice coarse like he had swallowed sandpaper.

But like the past hour, the short-statured hellhound only brought the same-old; “Nothing yet, no. Last time we talked to them, they said they were on their way.”

Golov’s already cracked, thin lips parted into a disgruntled sneer; “They’ve been saying that for the past hour. This is getting on my nerves, very quickly.” He pulled out a golden pocket watch from his waistcoat, flipping open the cap to check the time. His dismay only grew more intense; “Mrrgh, give me a break, please… The meeting was meant to begin eleven minutes ago!”

“They always do this,” the female hellhound uttered, replicating the Sinner’s irritation albeit mildly.

The ‘doing’ in question was being consistently late, especially on matters of inter-ring dialogue. On good days, such as at this hour, they would run at the very least fifteen minutes late; and on days that couldn’t get more terrible, they would announce they weren’t coming altogether. Greed was a very difficult “ally” to deal with, and the upper echelons of Greed itself knew this — with pride ironically enough.

“I knew this would happen, I told her,” Minister Golov said to the hellhound; “They’re very difficult people to deal with! I don’t know why we bother with them, why we don’t tell them to go away. I guarantee you, this meeting won’t end favourably.”

“Please don’t say that,” the hellhound begged, a tinge of worry in her eyes; “I-It has to go well, it has to!”

“Yes. Yes, it does have to,” Golov agreed with serious sincerity; “But will it is the pressing question.”

Whether it was coincidence or the Minister had summoned them through mention alone, coming around the corner of the royal gardens into view was a long black saloon car. The speed it was going was alarmingly quick, but it slowed down abruptly as the gap between it and the awaiting Stalinist diplomat hastily closed.

Soon as the vehicle came to a stop, a pair of high-profile figures stepped out from either side; the broad-shouldered one getting out in one swift motion, whilst his accomplice exited with a barely noticeable stumble. Just the heedless look in his facial expression suggested that he was very much 'on' something.

"You're late. Again," Minister Golov greeted, talking directly with the tall black-tunic donning Sinner.

"We understand zhat we are," Minister Ribbentrop replied; "Und we apologise. Zhere was a dust storm through Wrath, we had to divert."

This was the last thing Golov on behalf of Gluttony wanted to hear; "Dust storms, it's always bloody dust storms with you! You don't need to go through Wrath to get here anyway, that's the other way. Take the bypass next time."

"We got here as.. urgh, soon as we could," the clearly disoriented Courtier Hermann intervened, having just managed to lethargically make his way to the two politicians.

"I have a hard time believing that," came Minister Golov's cold and critical response.

Ribbentrop's deep red face, free of all signs of hair, turned alarmingly stern; "Are you accusing us of not taking our jobs seriously, Herr Golov?"

Despite the clear intimidation tactic, 'Herr Golov' remained steadfastly resolute; "I'm saying cease all of this being late nonsense, it wastes all of our time." He looked over the shoulders of both fellow Sinner Overlords, searching for one of the two stars of the upcoming shitshow. "Oh and that's just wonderful. Now you're going to tell me you forgot to bring the Lord of Greed."

Right on cue the air was suddenly filled with the pull of static electricity. It built up, more and more, until streaks of visible electricity appeared to the close right. A massive explosion of gray

smoke followed with a “BANG” followed barely five seconds later, and emerging from the spectacle was the large and in charge man of All-Greed himself.

A big, green grin stained Mammon’s bleached white face, and he opened his four arms minus one hand, staff in his top left; “Ya called?”

Minister Golov was left thoroughly unimpressed, his face of cracked gray pottery saying as much.

Mammon only returned the sour reception; “Ohh c’mon ya sook, ya know I can’t fit in cars!”

“I find that very hard to believe,” was the Gluttony diplomat’s blunt standpoint; “You have other forms.”

Being the true poet he was, Mammon delivered his excuse; “Yeah, well! Can’t be bothered to use ‘em. I’m here now anyway, what’s the problem?”

“Nothing,” Minister Golov conceded, disciplining himself away from the argument; “Now please, let’s begin. Her Lordship has been waiting.”

The Queen of Gluttony was utterly miserable. What usual spark she had had been snuffed out, and what remained was a very drained individual, dreading the trial that was to come. The fate of her realm’s stability rested in the shaky, delicate hands of Queen Bee, though the certainty in her grasp failed her. If all went right, then the United Realms of Hades would endure without so much of a snare, and Bee would in turn be hailed a hero; if she failed, then the lives of thousands — no, millions, would be at a risk not seen in well over five centuries. The Twenty-Years War between Gluttony and Wrath was one the immortal yet tormented being wished she could forget.

Vortex quietly invited himself back into the conference room, navigating around the long table to the far end where Bee sat. He asked for the third time that day; “Sure you’re okay, babe?”

Bee’s answer was unequivocal, and full of all the doubt in Hades all at once; “I don’t know, Texxie, I don’t-… I don’t— Dammit, I really don’t know.”

The depressing answer left Vortex as one fed up hellhound, fuelled by heartfelt concern as the love of this queen's — his queen's life; "Hey, you can still call this meeting off. Tell them to wait, until you're in a better frame of mind. Maybe tomorrow?"

Bee winced, lifting her head up from her palms; "But I can't, shugs, it has to be done now, today. I don't have a choice, 'cause if Lucifer finds out I called it off, he'll lose his shit!"

Vortex, in spite of the threat, remained stoic, "He can get fucked for all I care, who cares what he thinks? He's not attending this, is he? This isn't about him right now anyway, this is about you and how you're holding up."

"Tex, baby, it doesn't work that way." Bee's voice was firm but full of sorrow; "What's done around here is done, delays aren't tolerated. Last time someone delayed something like this, the whole ring got put into a regency! Gluttony can't afford that, not again."

Now Vortex was relatively familiar with the ins-and-outs of Hades governance, terminology and all. Every so often he would offer an ear into the intense bureaucracy Bee had to endure, of course with the permission of the queen herself. One of the most harrowing, foreboding mechanisms of governance the hellhound had ever heard was the 'Regency Act of 29' — a mechanism reserved for emergency situations where a ring's governing mechanism is deemed unfit for purpose. The whole idea to Vortex frightened him.

"Tex." — Bee's voice came as nothing more than a feeble squeak.

Still by her side, Vortex answered the call; "Yeah, hun?"

"You haven't… I saw him. You haven't seen him too, have you?"

The lesser hound became confused; "Seen who, hun?"

Bee did not reply. She looked like she wanted to, desperately so, but it was apparent that either she refused to or couldn't. Instead the troubled queen remained quiet, and beckoned with a hand for her dearest to come embrace.

Vortex did so, carefully wrapping his comforting muscular arms around the circumference of Bee's torso. One of the hound's favorite things about his lover was the radiant heat that pulsed off her, thanks to her 'lava lamp' stomach that acted as a heat bed at the best of times. Today the lava lamp felt especially warm, but not the warmth of a nice spring day that Vortex was accustomed to; this warmth felt distressed.

Snapping the couple out of their impromptu cuddling session was the double doors, patterned with etched hexagons, being opened. They groaned loudly, revealing the tall black, gray and white figure that was Minister Golov. The Sinner stood to attention, arms to his side in perfectly straight lines; "Your Lordship. The envoy has arrived," he announced in a smooth yet gravelly voice.

Before she even uttered anything in response, Bee looked back to Vortex who gazed right back — the time had come. With a sharp exhale, she looked back towards her courtier and said; "Let them in."

Abiding by the order, the irony of his past and all, Gluttony's Minister Golov grunted and allowed the envoy to come in. Whilst he found his designated seat, that was to Bee's left, the three-man-strong entourage made their way to the right.

Mammon of course led the charge, in one of the most infuriating ways possible; "Awwh fuck okay, here we gooo! More o' this hanky-spanky, ear-fuckin' talk from who else but the Queen-fucken-Bee herself! Do nag us about how WRONG we are, woman, I'm sure it won't get old!"

"Herr Mammon, bitte, shut up," was the harsh whispered advice Courtier Goering gave to his superior, and they began to sit down.

"THAT'S HIM!!" — Everyone jolted in their seats when the Queen of Gluttony sprang up from her seat! The chair almost fell backwards with the force Bee pushed it with, and with a wild look in her eye shot a finger directly behind Mammon's massive frame.

She cried out frantically, begging, vigorously shaking Vortex who sat beside him; "Tha-That's him, Tex!! LOOK, that's him! Tha-That's— That's…"

But just as she turned back to see where 'he' was, whoever she had seen was gone. It was like 'he' was never there to begin with.

It was Minister Golov who spoke up after the outburst; “Your Lordship, are you alright?”

She was far from it. In all truth, Bee was just as furthest away from being fine as it was possible to be. But Lucifer’s governing system didn’t care; the show had to go on. And so the Queen of Gluttony lied; “…Yes. Yes, I’m fine. Sorry, I thought I saw someone. Nevermind.”

Rampant confusion was rife in the room, both sides of politics glancing at each other, and even behind to identify anything that would explain the outburst. Of course, they couldn’t find anything. Bee’s sudden frantic episode dissipated from the collective minds of the entourage, despite it having occurred so soon.

The negotiations began without any more delay, beginning with an introductory delivered by Minister Golov, who remained standing. Tips of his spindly fingers splayed on the table, the old Bolshevik began; “On behalf of the Ring of Gluttony, I’d like to express my thanks to you all for coming today, to ensure that the stability of the United Realms of Hades endures. The Rings of Gluttony and Greed are crucial to the future of our governing system, and so with this in mind and heart, we must work together today to come to an agreement.”

There came a series of low utterances in the ranks of the Greed camp, especially between Mammon and his blemish-faced courtier.

Minister Golov turned to Bee for confirmation to continue, who got a nod to do so in return. He abided by the silent order; “Is there anyone within the room who has an objection?”

“Yeah, I do!” — The loudmouth objector in question was Mammon, quelle surprise.

The sheer look Minister Golov gave Mammon was one for the ages; “Yes, Your Lordship.”

Whatever benefit of the doubt anyone had on the table for the Lord of Greed was vanquished by him, and him alone; “Yeah, so can we skip the moral lectures from Her Bitchiness ovah theah? Don’t really feel like havin’ a migraine today, sorry not sorry.”

Mammon's most faithful courtier was forced to act; "Your Lordship, I will not advise you again, be quiet!"

"Yeah well, ya just did," Mammon obnoxiously snorted; "What ya gonna do?"

A series of groans permeated the air from either side, except for the Lord of Greed who wouldn't let some absurd idea like 'humility' get in his way.

Pretty much everyone chose to ignore him from there, instead turning to the far more tolerable Queen of Gluttony. After all, it was her turn to speak. She started by addressing her counterpart, having seemingly suppressed the fright she got earlier; "Mammon, please. These issues have been going on for far too long, maybe centuries! We've got to end this, today."

"Yeah? On what authority," Mammon boldly questioned.

Bee sneered; "By my authority, asshole! Your bullshit going on in *your* ring is affecting my ring, and I don't want that! So either you agree to sort things out today, here, right the hell now, or I'll go straight to Lucifer saying you're being difficult."

"Good! Go tell him," was Mammon's exceptionally brave dare; "An' I'll tell him myself that there's nuthin to talk about! Nada, absolute zilch!"

The negotiations were evidently going very well, overbearing warts, migraines and all. And this was the state of play for the next ten grueling minutes; anytime either Minister Golov or Ribbentrop would put forth a workable proposal, in came Mammon of Greed with his infamous objections.

That was, mainly — To the surprise of Minister Golov and Vortex, Bee of Gluttony had her own set of reservations. One of these was the issue of the crime epidemic. As proposed by the joint work between both Inter-Rings Ministers, a comprehensive inquiry would be put into place to investigate the ins-and-outs of Greed's most notorious crime families. While Mammon's response was a hard no, Bee's response was a timid sort of objection, saying that she wanted to think it through. For the first time that summit, Mammon was left surprised by this unexpected conclusion — he squinted at her, pondering her intentions.

But this wasn't the only odd behavior on Bee's part. Throughout the entire duration of the summit thus far, she seemed somewhat paranoid and skittish, seeming to be darting her attention from the attendees before her, behind their backs, and even towards the door. Everybody noticed it, but nobody dared to bring it up; it was probably best not to.

Finally it all came to a head around the thirty-two-minute mark, when Minister Golov thumped his hand against the table. "Right," he declared; "This is evidently getting nowhere. Your Lordships, I would like to request a temporary adjournment of fifteen minutes. I'd like to discuss these developments between myself and my Greed counterpart across the table."

Minister Golov's assessment of how things were going was not just correct, it was unseemly so. Bee and Mammon gave each other a sour glance, a telltale sign of the tension in the room, before in mutual agreement silently nodding to the Inter-Rings Minister's request.

Permission to adjourn now granted, Minister Golov nodded to his counterpart to follow him outside. He did so, and both high-ranking Sinners shuffled out into the largely empty palace, closing the doors behind them for privacy. Tense chatter between the four remaining inside continued.

It was Minister Ribbentrop who let out a disgruntled breath, shaking his head in disapproval. "Zhis is ridiculous," the Greed representative dismayed, pressing his hand against the adjacent wall; "From either of zhem."

"Hm. They're like children," Minister Golov wholeheartedly agreed, hands clasped pensively behind his back; "It's a wonder how they've lasted this long, and for so many centuries. You'd figure they'd sort something like this out with haste, but evidently not."

"Unstoppable force meets an immovable object," Minister Ribbentrop quipped, the humor in his voice as dry as a desert; "If I knew it would be zhis difficult, I wouldn't have ever accepted mein position."

A low sort of grumble emanated from the seasoned ex-Communist, who pondered even more; "Mm. My mind might be the same... You know if it was possible, I would declare to the supreme authority that both of our administrations need to be put under a regency. It's just not workable, either of them."

“And Her Lordship,” Minister Ribbentrop added, gesturing towards the closed door; “Vhat’s up with her? She’s been acting strange all summit long! Somezhing is up vith her, I can tell. We all can tell!”

“Yes, indeed,” came forth Minister Golov’s short but concise reply. Though he wasn’t meant to admit it, he knew that all in all something was in fact wrong with his employer. He had caught hints of it for the past few days, but today her paranoia was at its most intense. The Minister didn’t know what to make of it, as it was beyond his guess. But his job wasn’t to question; it was to negotiate and uphold the key interests.

But see, ex-Commissar Oleg Golov was alone with another fellow lowly diplomat, and as the saying old as time itself roughly goes; two minds can think alike. He turned to fellow Minister Ribbentrop with an inquisitive gaze, and asked; “So considering today, and the lack of any movement. What would your solution be?”

“My solution,” Ribbentrop repeated, beginning to think; “To be frankly honest, I vould advise… if I had zhe freedom to dictate so, I’d order a total restructure of zhe entire operation. New systems, new bureaucracy, new faces… a new leader. Vhat say you?”

A wide smirk creased across Golov’s cracked gray face, wrinkling it further; “Much the same, sir. Very much the same. I assume you’ve had these thoughts before, seeming they’re so well thought through.”

“All the time,” Minister Ribbentrop confessed, drawing a heavy, tired breath; “Tends to happen vhen you deal with someone like zhat fat lump in a jumpsuit in zhere.”

“Nnn, I can imagine,” came Minister Golov’s feedback, his smirk having graduated into a grin.

“If I have to listen to zhat moron complain about his missing hand again, I vill give him mein resignation zhen and zhere! Can’t get over it! Hasn’t even told me vhat exactly happened, only zhat some hellhound is apparently responsible.”

Minister Golov jumped at this opportunity to ask; “Knowing him, he probably deserved whatever happened. Don't you think?”

Ribbentrop nodded, at first reservedly, but it grew in confidence in short time; “In certain ways, yes.”

A small, reserved titter was exchanged between the two Sinners as they grinned mutually; it was perhaps the first time in over eighty years that these two, very opposing forces ever exchanged a friendly gesture. And there was more to come, as Minister Golov fished what else but two cigars from within his black dress coat, as well as a bulky steel lighter. He propped one of them in his mouth, and handed the second to the fellow statesman, who accepted it at first with reluctance, but then with confidence when he realized they were both alone.

Billows of cigar smoke quickly accumulated around the two ‘opposing’ Sinners as they had a mutual smoke. The tension too subsided with the appearance of the smoke, like the burning tobacco was a cleanse.

Suddenly Ribbentrop began to speak, having submerged himself in reminiscence; “The twenty-third of August, nineteen-thirty-nine. Moscow. You weren’t there, vere you?”

“No, I was,” Minister Golov corrected, joining right into the recollection; “I was in charge of the security affairs there, just at the gates of Red Square. It was tight, intense, everyone was a suspect. Stalin told us not to take any chances, and we didn’t. We made two-hundred arrests that day, us at the NKVD. Stalin loved it.”

“Of course he loved it,” Minister Ribbentrop said humorously. He fixed his posture to lean up restfully against the wall; “I remember meeting him zhat day. I still remember shaking hands with him, and zhe blinding flash of that bloody camera. Zhe whole welt saw the power that was projected that day, zhe possibility of cooperation between two opposing sides made reality. Zhe newspapers went wild, from London to Warsaw.”

A plume of smoke belched through Golov’s cracked mouth as he chuckled a disgusting laugh; “Very interesting times, those were. Sometimes I wish I could go back to them, relive them. Suppose today is the closest I’ll get to that.”

“Yes. Have to agree with you there,” Minister Ribbentrop nodded along in agreement, unceremoniously dispensing the spent ash onto the ground without a care for cleanliness.

Out of chance the two men of opposite allegiances looked out into the foreground. Where they stood was the lower balcony of Bee’s extravagant palace, every inch of it washed in all sorts of

whites, yellows, pinks, and oranges, the walls patterned in hexagonal shapes which wrapped around the entire circumference. The palace, more glorified night club, looked eerie being empty; the gigantic disco ball hanging high above made of pure hexagonal crystals left with nobody to dazzle with its shimmering light.

Minister Golov was the first to comment on the scene, snickering; “Tsh, look at that… What has that woman done to this place?”

Minister Ribbentrop muttered something incoherent, something about a lack of architectural knowledge and how much of a migraine magnet it was.

The ex-Communist sort of discarded the unintelligible comment, and continued; “I remember when it was a beautiful old palace, not the.. obnoxious eyesore it is now. I loved the chandelier it had, and she went and replaced it with that… what is it, a disco ball? Stupid! Forgive me, but it frankly is.”

“What the boss says, goes,” Minister Ribbentrop replied plainly, continuing to enjoy his savory cigar. He made it to the balcony railing in a low saunter devoid of urgency, and propped his folded arms on the ledge. When he settled down, Greed’s Inter-Rings Minister stayed silent for a little while, before finally he sighed unexpectedly; “It’s the strangest thing, Herr Golov. I must tell you this, it’s from a while ago. Zhis was before you came along, und in your place was another Minister. Now I can’t remember his name, but he recalled to me a strange thing that happened between him and Her Lordship one evening.”

Though Minister Golov didn’t say a word, his attention was entirely paid to the counterpart who’s back was now faced to him.

Ribbentrop didn’t need a sound-off to understand he was being listened to. He continued without pause; “It vas nigh on forty years ago. I don’t know how we ended up talking about it, but ve ending up recalling oddities zhat we found between our respective employers. Can’t remember vhat I recalled about Herr Mammon for zhe afterlife of me, but I do recall vhat your predecessor told me.”

“He said zhat one night, he was in a private audience vith Her Lordship, and zhey were talking about internal affairs. The radio was playing in zhe background, with a track of classical music she always fancied — you might be familiar with it, who knows. But he said zhat-.. zhat as they were talking, the track zhat was playing suddenly cut off. It went silent, but zhe white noise was hissing through the speakers, so the radio hadn’t died. Her Lordship didn’t hesitate to get up und correct zhe fault, but when she did, und as she honed in on it, something different began playing.”

“It vasn’t music either according to him, but numbers. In zhis voice that sounded muffled und dead, it sounded off with large spaces between each number. *‘One ... Seven ... Zero ... Seven’* — it was just like zhat, und it lasted around half a minute, repeating itself. Now zhis predecessor of yours was of course confused, but what confused him more was just how still Her Lordship vas being. As he described it, she was in a state of petrification, like she was frozen. She apparently vasn’t breathing either, so it began to concern him. But as soon as he got up, zhe numbers stopped und the music began playing again, as normal.”

“In sync Her Lordship snapped back to life, und she staggered back to where she was sitting in the first place. Your predecessor had full intention to ask vhat had happened, but something told him to leave it alone. He said zhat there was zhis… electrical smell in zhe air above them, surrounding them. Zhe remainder of the audience was spent in silence.”

The story as a whole was daunting, and Minister Golov’s following lack of response said as much. Nor did Minister Ribbentrop need to add anything more, as the story — at least how much he was comfortable with telling — had been told in full. Much like the recalling of events of an anomalous incident long passed, the rest of the Ministers’ stay outside was spent in silence.

Time passed relatively quickly, and the cigars were all spent. In a uniform, two-person line, the two diplomats shuffled back inside — it was going to be a long two hours.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, this is the author!

If you’ve made it this far, that means you have reached around the halfway mark of this part of the Stranded Hound Series. Thank you so much for your support!

Because this is the halfway mark, I’m pleased to announce that I’ve made a Discord server specifically for the purposes of an upcoming Q&A! This will give you the opportunity to ask the questions you might have about the fanfic, and I will also reveal a few smaller details that I will talk about — these however will be considerably spoiler free.

Discord Link: https://discord.gg/z2JP7FSV

Thank you all for reading!

Pub Crawl

—=THURSDAY=—

Loona breathed in the interior smell of old building when she waltzed through the doors of the ‘Coachman’s Inn Hotel’. She was dressed in her usual blue crop top, but exchanged her shorts for a pair of long black pants, and a black leather jacket she had bought months prior. What’s more, the bruises that once peppered Loona’s body had now completely disappeared, and slowly but surely she was getting back into the swing of things.

The gothic young woman looked the part as she meandered to the front bar, a few casual, curious glances coming her way from the few locals that were there. An older bush ballad played on the radio going off in the background, just loud enough to hear but quiet enough to make conversation or a quiet time enjoyable.

The disguised hound found herself a spot to the center-left, free bar stool and all, taking it for herself by sitting up upon it. Looking to her right, Loona recognized the exact spot where she and Blitz went drinking months ago; shortly before — or after, depending — the whole fiasco she now found herself in started. She remembered just how much she bonded with him, and a warm reminiscent smile found its way upon her lips. Loona only wished she could see him again.

“Hey, lady! What can I get for ya?”

Loona jolted out of her daydream, and spun her head to the old barman now standing before her. The first thing she noticed was his walrus’ mustache, not that the hound could help it, jutting out at her in all of its bushy glory.

Snapping herself back into gear, Loona tried to place her order; “Oh! Uh, uhm… oh fuck, um… wh-whatever you have, thanks.”

The barman raised a wrinkled brow, and smirked; “We got all sortsa shit here, that doesn’t narrow it down much. C’mon! What will it be, ya must want something.”

Squinted became Loona's eyes and she peered at the labels on the beer taps. She didn't even know what half of them were, or what they tasted like, so she went by random selection; "Ehh… Argh. Give me a.. fucking- gimme a Stone & Wood. In a schooner, thanks."

"Righto!" — The barman got right to work with a steady hand, grabbing one of the fresh schooner glasses stacked before him and tilting it the right way up. He tried to make small talk to his latest patron; "Can't say I've seen you around often, lady."

Loona shook her head, slightly forcing herself to join in; "Huff- Nah, don't really come down this way. Not a lot, anyway. I've been here a couple times though."

"Yeah, I think I remember seeing ya," the barman nodded, just now filling the glass with the pale ale Loona ordered; "Once or twice, I think. Not in 'ere though, out there in public. Haven't given ya a proper look though, you're usually in the background."

"Hmph. Yeah, that's me alright," Loona muttered with dry humor, drumming her fingers against the bar top's fine wood surface; "Say. Usually the other guy's here where you are. Yanno, the guy with the big ass sideburns?"

"Ah yeah, Monty!" The old man's voice beamed with instant recognition; "Yeah nah, he retired last week."

Loona raised a brow of her own; "No shit. You're kidding?"

"Yep," the barman shrugged, still going with filling Loona's serving; "Ahh yanno, ya get tired of it, an' ya move on. Monty had his run, had enough of it after thirty years. So now I'm here from down state, New South Wales."

"New South Wales…" Loona repeated slowly, trying to figure out if she remembered anything of the sort. She shook her head; "Can't say I've heard of-.. Ohh wait, yeah I know where that is."

His latest patron's lapse of memory came as great entertainment to him, making him wheeze a little with hissing laughter; "Was gonna say!" Swift was the barman's hand as he slid the glass the short distance to Loona's open hand; "There ya go, enjoy."

An anticipating smile found itself on Loona's face again, and she quietly nodded a "thank you" to the most generous servant. She slapped a five-dollar note on the counter for the barman, then with a thirst that needed to be quenched took her first sip. The drink was bitter at first, yet came a sweeter sort of aftertaste after a few seconds. Loona found herself liking it, and already contemplating whether she wanted a second one.

While she drank, again the young woman's strange red iris eyes drifted back to further up the bar, where two empty bar stools stood. That same feeling of longing from just over a minute earlier came back.

"You aight there?" — It was apparent that the disguised hound's own facial expression had betrayed her, whatever solemn look she had indicating her thoughts.

Again Loona snapped back to attention; "Hm? Oh, yeah. Just missing someone is all," she said, lazily pointing to the two empty bar stools that took hold of her attention.

"Ah right," the barman said, sounding like he had heard it all before; "Wanna tell me who?"

"Why would I tell you anything, I barely know ya," Loona asked, bringing up a valid point.

Underneath his walrus mustache a knowing smile appeared; "Aight, keep your secrets."

The gothic patron blinked, taken mildly aback; "Secret? Nothing secret about missing your old man — ohh, goddammit…" — The secret was now no longer so.

It was in response to this that the old barman nodded respectfully, raising his old wrinkled brow. "I get it," he sniffed, placing his rough hands flat on his side of the bar; "Nah yeah, I remember when I lost my dear ol' dad. Wasn't nice, not for me or mum. He didn't go out a good way either, he—"

"Nono, he's not dead," Loona raised her voice, clarifying clearly before the old man went on any further; "Not from what I know anyway. We, uh… well I can't see him anymore. Not allowed to. If I try to, I'm dead, literally."

When Loona looked up from her glass after taking another swig, she noticed the genuinely intrigued yet stunned look on his face.

He said as much, too, blowing a restricted gust of air; “Shit. So like actually dead, ‘ay?”

“Yep,” came Loona frank reply, complete with a slow nod; “Actually dead. It’s a whooole mess.”

“Sounds like it, ay.” Thoughtfully the old barman rapped both sets of fingers against against the bar he leant against. He didn’t know where to look as the female patron paid far more attention to her drink. Eventually before too long, he piped out reservedly; “Well bugger, I know we don’t know each other for a bar o’ soap, but I wish there was somethin’ I could do for ya.”

“There’s nothing you can do,” Loona assured without making eye contact, focusing instead on her savory beverage still growing on her. She took another few small gulps, then finished her sentence; “Don’t worry about it.”

Trying to fish for helpful advice from himself, the barman offered; “Didja… wanna go to the police about it? I’m sure they can help ya.”

Loona vigorously shook her head, swatting her hand away at the thought; “No, no, it’s not that typa thing. This isn’t something they can deal with, either.”

There came no form of talk back, and both parties fell into silence once again. The barman got himself to tidy up what little mess there was on his side, while the newcomer quietly drank. She hadn’t gone too far with it, only a few mouthfuls worth having been downed, the alcohol working through her system without a hitch. It was perhaps one of the best experiences Loona ever had with trying a new drink, comparing it to others where she would end up with the churning tides of her stomach; that addicting aftertaste made her savor for more.

The radio in the background continued to play, another song beginning that started first and foremost with a rustic guitar, followed by a man’s raspy but clear singing voice. He sang, ironically enough, of a pub with no beer.

Just as all was still, the busy old barman put his whistling old voice to work; “Call me rude or whatnot, but you remind me of someone I know.”

In turn Loona gave a suspicious side-eye; “Is that a good thing, or bad thing?”

“Oh no, good! Ya just, ah… ya look familiar, but not in the way I meant earlier. I got a niece who looks sorta like ya, probably a little bit older. She’s a smart thing, studies psychology.”

“Good for her,” Loona remarked, trying to be her nicest. Not that she was willing to be hostile, more rather she wanted to drink to herself without the breaks.

Luckily for the solitary patron, the conversation did eventually peter off, the natural sounds of a quiet public drinking house instead filling her ears. A conversation between strangers went on from somewhere behind, a laugh or two exchanged here and there after some unknown humorous remark. But Loona didn’t care to find out, rather wanting to stay out of things, just for a little while. Besides, Jim was out doing whatever he needed to do around town, and so she had ample time until home called again.

Ten minutes had come and gone, and Loona’s glass of ‘Stone & Wood’ had reached halfway down. Around this time she heard without paying much attention the sound of footsteps coming up alongside. They were heavy and lumbering, carrying a sheer weight that would make anyone else buckle.

The presence made its way to the lone woman’s right, then let out a gross sort of snort as it sat down. His voice was awfully distinct; “Barman. One drink, whiskey.”

An intense flare of dread arose inside Loona, and she froze; she had a good idea of exactly who had just sat beside her. She cautiously tilted her head with that ever-rising dread — sure enough there was “the bear” in all of his tall, bulky, scarred display.

His attire hadn’t improved by much from the last Loona saw of him, though he did wear a clean dark blue singlet overlayed by a plaid maroon overshirt. Cargo shorts covered most of his legs from just below the knee upwards, and on his feet were a pair of old sand-coloured work boots. Furthermore he hadn’t bothered to shave before he left his cave, and a thick stubble was beginning to form around his face. His bald head shone underneath the overhead light, perhaps the only humorous thing about his overall unfriendly appearance.

By the time Loona realized she was staring, she had almost caught his attention before snapping back to her drink. She drank with a far more intense demeanor, her hand clasped vice-tight around the cold dew-smeared glass, trying her best to play it cool. There was no way in hell she was going to let ‘him’ ruin her quiet time.

Luckily this strategy of ‘ignore and forget’ seemed to play off, as “the bear” seemed far more interested in the glass of whiskey just handed to him. He snorted a grotesque sort of sniff, and his four-and-a-half fingered right hand grabbed hold of the carated glass. The ice clattered around inside as “the bear” went bottoms up, conserving as much of his serving to savor for a little while longer. Carefulness was a foreign concept to ‘Uncle Nikita’ when he slammed the glass back onto the bar top — luckily it didn’t shatter upon impact, the only consequence being a sour look from the old barman.

Still Loona tried her best to ignore the imposing figure beside her, hearing him mutter something topped off by a slurred *“urgh, kurwa”* at the very end. The gothic patron had just finished shakily swallowing her next swig, when she realized she had heard that slurred expression only once before. But just as Loona began trying to figure out from where it came, even more words followed.

'The bear’s' voice rattled out again; “You… You, woman. Where I see you from, huh?”

Desperately, Loona silently prayed that the words weren’t directed at her. A bead of sweat trickled down her temple, across to the top of her lip, then plummeted into her drink. The disguised hound tried to think logically — maybe there was some other woman who had sat beside him, one that Loona hadn’t noticed before.

This wasn’t the case. Again “the bear” rumbled; “Hey. Woman, I talk to you. Where I see you before…”

The lump in Loona’s throat was hard to swallow, and she forced herself to answer. “I-I dunno,” she choked out, her voice rasp despite the drink; “I can’t say— I haven’t seen you before in my life. You got the wrong person, man, sorry.”

“No-no-no… No, I see you before. I know I have, certain...” — The ever-so delightful ‘Uncle Nikita’ remained adamant, his obstructed judgment tampered by alcoholism no match for his

stubborn conviction. His one eye looked the young woman up and down with an agonizingly sharp glare, his brain evidently working overtime to identify who the ‘stranger’ was.

Meanwhile Loona remained firmly seated, restraining herself from making any sudden movements. Her theory was that if the ‘bear’ nickname had any bearing, her lack of movement would make him eventually forget she was even there. A ridiculous idea even in Loona’s own mind, but it was the only option she had.

It did not work. Just as Loona thought she was in the clear, the grizzled man uttered a few words that sent alarm bells ringing; “…You were with Svetlana. You’re… Oh yes, I know you.”

“…Wha— With who now,” Loona replied with a tone so hoarse from tension, still attempting to play clueless.

The charade however was up, having expired seconds ago like a shriveled insect. Loona flinched a little when ‘Uncle Nikita’ thumped his glass against the wooden counter; out of brashness rather than anger, as he wasn’t just yet.

He did however speak straight to Loona, making his reading of their second impromptu meeting clear; “You think I stupid, don’t you? No say you don’t think, because I know you do. I no stupid, I know lot of things when happen.”

Loona’s lips of black lipstick quivered, “But I—”

“AH— Quiet. I am talking.” — ‘Uncle Nikita’ held the glass by the uppermost rim with the tips of his fingers. He swirled the dark brown liquid within it in a fidget, pivoting around in a gentle grind against the countertop. “I know what you want with me. You stalk me, yes? You-You want to, say.. find out more about me. Relay back to little Svetlana who know nothing about me.”

Loona reeled back, narrowing her eyes to a tight squint; “What? Now wait a damn minute, I haven’t seen her since—”

“AH— Shut up,” ‘the bear’ growled again, raising his volume for the second time that encounter. “You want know about me? Okay. Here something you know about me — I don’t like little

strangers who come running for me. In fact, njet… I hate them. In fact, I hate you," Nikita stirred, giving the gothic woman several years his junior a cold death glare.

Enter stage left was the barman, who had just about witnessed and heard enough; "'Ey matey. You're not doin' this here, alright? You wanna do that, ya gotta leave."

Nikita swiveled his head to the barman, and looked to him with disapproval; "Am I talk to you, barman? I don't, do I?"

"Yeah nah, well I am," the barman put his foot down from a place of authority; "Don't start shit in 'ere, this isn't the place."

Nikita let out a smirk on his scarred face, riding the eyepatch up slightly. Anyone could assume that he was enjoying the disturbance he was causing. He explained with feigned innocence; "I no start anything. I just explain to little lady that she can't stalk people. That is no crime, no?"

Being the subject of the unwanted ridicule, Loona made a stand for herself; if she was going to get out of this, she would need to do it peacefully. "Alright, you listen here," Loona began, coming off a little abrupt; "I've got literally no idea of what I've done to upset you. Do you wanna, like, get something off your chest? I'm right here."

The facade that was Nikita's expression shifted slightly, a tinge of confusion emerging underneath all of that steely-faced sneer. His head pivoted on his neck to face back to Loona, and once he locked eyes — well, eye — to her, Nikita asked; "Get it off my chest?"

"Dude, I dunno! Trying my best here to figure out why you're being such an asshole."

"Oh, I asshole? You say I asshole, yes?"

"Yeah! I am for a matter of fact! What do you think I'm gonna do, be nice to you when you've openly said you hate me? Sorry man, but newsflash; life just doesn't work that way. Now do you wanna say why you hate me, or not?"

A kettle began boiling in the room; that ‘kettle’ being Nikita who was now wheezing with laughter. It built up from a hiss, into a low grating rattle, then into a hearty guffaw that caught everyone’s attention; though nobody saw what was so funny. Through each reeling cackle, Nikita took his glass to his lips and threw his head back, letting the whiskey fall right through his throat in a beeline to his stomach.

After effortlessly guzzling the liquor in one swoop, Nikita thumped it back down to earth and he continued his thunderous laughter. Eventually it ended with a gradual fizzle and he caught his breath, balling his free right hand into a fist which he pressed against the table. Loona could practically see the veins bulge in his wrist.

Barely containing the mysterious contempt he harbored for Loona, Nikita burned his glare into her with an absence of mercy or respect for her personal space. He spoke in a low tremor, but his words held power; “Here is what will happen. I will leave, get out of here. Head somewhere else, far away from you. You stay here, away from me. That way there will be no trouble, and we both forget we met again. But if I see you again, anywhere out there — I make you regret you ever lived. You understand, or I need to beat it into you?”

Loona shot a nervous glance to the barman on the other side, who looked just about ready to throw the burly troublemaker out, but seemed too hesitant to act. Left with no backup to her severe discomfort, Loona forced herself to look back at her would-be assailant, drawing a steady, laborious breath. With a signature stern look of her own, she nodded quietly, desperately hoping this would be the end of it.

Turns out it was. To Loona’s relief this marked the end of Nikita’s stay, as his unceremonious departure now took place. After no more than a couple minutes' stay, the ghastly-appearing man got up from his stool with a grunt, and in a lumbering step left out from the way he came in — he muttered to himself something, obviously derogatory. The overbearing smell of excessive body spray left along with him, a scent that Loona had only just noticed by its absence. Her true feelings for old ‘Uncle Nikita’ shone through soon as he left, a stiffened pale middle finger shot in his general direction.

With the tension quickly dissipated and the normal calm atmosphere returning, the barman wheezed; “Hey listen, sorry about not kicking him out. I was gonna, but—”

“Yeah well, you shoulda,” Loona blurted out in a huff, shaking her head while going back to her drink. Her anger quickly faded to a passive tone, and she looked back up to the barman; “Look it’s okay, it’s fine. It’s fine, nothing happened, just a… huff— I’ve met him before. He’s just a big, drunk, alcoholic, Russian asshole. It’s nothing to think about, who gives a fuck.”

“Whatcha do to upset him that much,” the white-haired barman duly asked, obviously full of questions.

“I dunno, dude,” Loona shrugged, finally taking another sip of her slightly diluted ale; “Apparently I can’t help his niece out, or something. Didn’t like the fact I disturbed his ‘peace’, if he had peace to begin with. Again, who cares? He’s just a douchebag lowlife.”

“Yeah, but he’s not Russian!” — A third party from somewhere behind Loona called out, having obviously eavesdropped into the whole ordeal that just unfolded. It was a woman’s voice, one that sounded slightly crackly like tobacco had taken its toll on her vocals.

Now of course this caught Loona’s attention, and she twisted herself around. “Say what now,” she called back out, not entirely sure of who had spoken; not that Loona particularly cared.

“He’s not Russian,” the woman called out again, coming from the small two-seater table directly behind the silver-haired gothic patron; “He’s, uh… I have to guess, like, Polish! He said “koor-vah,” that’s Polish for ‘fuck’!”

“Huh,” Loona replied, raising her brow; “Well shit, the more you know. Either way, he’s a drunken asshole! No wonder he’s so fucking lonely, piece o’ shit.”

Just as she said this, a thought appeared inside the forefront of Loona’s mind as she settled herself back down. Why did that Russian girl, that ‘Svetlana Bordatsky’, care so much about an uncle that obviously wanted nothing to do with her, or the world? Loona had been asking that question ever since she met Svetlana, but now the question was far more intense. She now speculated that something else was going on, there had to be; why else would that niece be so relentlessly caring about her good-for-nothing uncle? The question within that speculation was what exactly.

But then again, Loona thought in that moment while quietly sipping her schooner, maybe there was simply no reasoning at all. Whether for good or for bad, maybe that's just how Svetlana Bordatsky was; well-meaning and good-spirited, but incredibly naive. Loona began to think in hyperbolic terms; while Svetlana was an outstretched hand, her uncle Nikita was a closed fist. The duality of humanity, manifested into the form of a family with its fair share of problems. That last part made Loona smirk; she knew all too well about familial quirks, being a part of a very different family of her own.

It was in that moment when another pressing question came, just as Loona was about to forget it all; what was he doing down this neck of the woods? The query made her pause dramatically; if anyone was going to accuse another of stalking, it was Loona to Nikita, not vice versa. The disguised hound swiveled around on her barstool, looking back towards the wide-open entrance with an inquisitive, suspicious look. Arising within her was the nagging urge to investigate.

"Hold this for me a sec," Loona found herself saying to the barman only half-listening, then slid herself off the barstool and towards the door.

The barman only noticed what his patron was doing the second he spun around; "Hey, where ya goin'?"

"Just taking a look! I'll be back," Loona half-shouted back, then with only an inkling of certainty of what she was doing headed outside. Whatever 'taking a look' exactly meant even Loona herself wasn't sure of, all she knew was that something about old 'Uncle Nikita's' presence this far away from his 'cave' roused suspicion. She didn't even know he drived, or that he was capable.

The day had gotten largely overcast that late morning, so Loona's eyes had no trouble adjusting to the outside when she stepped out; the timber canopy stretching the length of the footpath above also provided ample shade. The footpaths proved quiet that morning, save for the odd passer-by who didn't pay Loona any mind as she strolled past, maybe wondering what exactly she looked so determined for.

What Loona was determined about was staying hidden in plain sight from 'the bear'. She found him in short time, lumbering his way down the largely empty footpath heading into the center of town, thankfully not bothering to look behind to notice the nosey, gothic woman now actually stalking him from afar. Though Loona maintained a stone-faced look, she felt the adrenaline coursing through herself, wondering if his threats from earlier held any water — she hoped they didn't, frankly having enough of being beaten. The further Loona followed from way behind, the more people there were, passing by the tall, hulking, debatably sober man and in turn obscuring his follower's view of him.

It was then Loona tried to catch up, quickening her step and brushing past people coming the opposite way. But she was losing him and fast, and in spite of his size he began to vanish. Loona swore under her harsh breath and again picked up the pace, almost tripping over her own shoes past the rows of shops full of people coming and going. The crowds were quickly becoming too much to hurry through, making striding in a straight line an impossible task — but still Loona stalked, unwilling to let go of the vanishing trail.

“No- fuck! N-No, come on,” the pursuer cussed, her sweating far more blatant than it was, and her face wore a feeling of worry.

People were starting to give the odd stranger glances as she tried to jog, brushing far too close for comfort where they almost tripped. But Loona didn’t care, in fact she couldn’t care less; her vibrant red-iris eyes were locked in to her big hulking prize which she couldn’t even see anymore.

Then came disaster.

“Wh-AH!!” — The world spun around aggressively when Loona’s shoulder collided with someone, sending her tumbling embarrassingly to the ground. Now on the floor in dull pain, she wasted no time in staggering back up, deciding whether to apologize profusely or to dish out hell in a handbasket.

Who Loona didn’t expect to see was Jim, himself still upright, having not suffered the humility of losing his balance.

Jim coughed as he helped Loona up, having had the wind just about knocked out of him; “Shit, Loona! What the hell are ya- wh-what’s going on?”

Though humiliated, Loona’s gusto hadn’t faltered. She shot a finger forward; “Him! That fucker right there, HE is what’s going on!”

Jim now stood there dumbfounded, completely out of the loop; “What, who?”

Loona persisted, desperately pointing like mad; “Over there! That big fuck-off guy I told you about, he’s-, he’s…”

In the middle of her shouting, Loona spun her head around to see where she pointed, only to discover that old ‘Uncle Nikita’ was no longer visible. Jim obviously couldn’t see him either, making the disguised hound’s ravings look baseless; at most, insane.

Her ravings completely subsided, and she fell silent, unsure of how to explain herself. Loona made a short series of gasps and sputters in an attempt to speak, but these too died off when she turned around to look back. She found Jim staring right back at her, a tense and almost fed up look with his lips tightly pressed together. It was daunting to see this sort of look from Jim, who up to this point had been unusually nonchalant about the whole thing between himself and the hellhound he once again accommodated for.

Just as Loona was about to point this strange look out, she stopped when Jim ran an open palm down his face. Then he spoke, a short and straight to the point; “Can we talk?”

“T-Talk,” Loona sputtered, feeling uneasy; “Talk about what, what do you mean ta—”

“Fuck sake, just follow me,” Jim at once interrupted, and without another word began walking off.

If Loona wasn’t confused just before by Jim’s unusual demeanor, she certainly was now as she watched him blend into the moderate crowds. She quickly snapped to action and began following, all the while a bad feeling hung over her; something was up, and she somehow knew she was in for it, whatever that was.

She followed the hatted figure of young James Steele for a good few feet, subconsciously looking around to also check if her initial target was still around, to no avail. Eventually Loona saw Jim break off into an alleyway to his left, not even bothering to turn around to see if his de-facto roommate was even following.

And still Loona followed suite; “Wait, dude! Jim, c’mon, just stop a sec!” At last she stopped at the throat of the open-air alleyway. It was a breathable sort of neck between two old brick buildings, the far-end leading to a sort of asphalt-based back area overshadowed by a small gumtree.

But the gothic woman didn’t have time to admire the alleyway, nor did she want to. Her attention was fully paid to Jim, who paced around with his hands behind his back, looking decently bothered.

Noticing this, now Loona was fully perturbed. She found herself speaking, almost out of her own will; “You… You look pissed. What’s going- what’s the matter?”

Jim stopped his pacing and faced Loona fully. His mouth was still pursed and tense, and he spoke as such; “Can ya cut it out?”

Loona froze, stiff as a board; “Cut it out?”

“Yeah, ya heard me,” Jim told her in the bluntest of ways, and he refused to elaborate.

Bewildering was the icy reception Loona had been given from literally out of nowhere. She gawked at the young man standing tight-faced before her, wondering if this was even the same ‘Jim’ that she had grown to know.

The stunned hound sputtered, becoming progressively offended; “Cut-… The fuck you mean, cut what out? I’m not doing anything.”

“Like fuck you’re not,” came the human’s rebuke.

Loona, now wide-eyed and stern-faced, was at last offended; “Wooaahh, okay! Listen here, man, I’m not gonna take being spoken to like that. The fuck’s up with you?”

“I’m exhausted, Loona, that’s what’s up with me!”

“Exhausted??”

Jim didn’t know whether to nod wildly in confirmation or continue, leading to him sputtering wordlessly for a little bit. But soon he found his voice; “You know— Well, fucken— Just of this whole fucken escapade I’ve been through with ya! It’s every bloody time with ya whenever we’re together, all sortsa shit gets wiry, from here to fucken Timbuktu! Can we have a bitta peace please, is that possible?”

“Hey, it’s not my fault that huge Russian bastard’s here,” Loona spat in return, again gesturing her hand with gusto; “He-He tried to fight me in the bar just now!”

“It's not just that, Loona!”

It was this sudden confession, delivered loudly for the whole world to hear, that made Loona freeze like she never froze before. The only movement that came from her henceforth was her eyelids, closing into a hard, judgmental squint; “Something’s up with you, dude,” she accused, her tone calm but still confronting; “Since I came here, you’ve been all distant and dismissive of me whenever I talk about how I’m feeling. Ya keep telling me that “I’ll be okay,” that “I’ll be fine and whatnot” and “to have faith in myself,” when I’m not fucking okay! All I ask for is a bitta support, and now you’re kicking up a fat stink about it. Not cool, dude, not cool!”

The echo of Loona’s powerful voice ricocheted off either brick wall, traveling either end with ease. Jim didn’t reply immediately, instead refraining from rebuking back and in its place was a firm stare. The stare didn’t come alone, as it seemed to be holding back something that he wanted to say.

With Loona being an exceptional reader of faces, she picked up on this; “Come on then, spit it out! I know ya got something on your mind, so just tell me. … Oh come ON, Jim! Just tell me, don’t be an asshole!”

“Loona, I went to HELL!”

Loona stood there wide-eyed, unable to move.

Jim continued unabated; “I went to hell, Loona! Have you forgotten about that? I went to hell, and I saw things I wasn’t meant to see! That whole thing that happened there, wha-whatever that was, it fucken drained me! Ya don’t just get over shit like that, it stays with ya! Do ya get that, or not?”

“Jim, I— Where is this-… What are you—”

“Like I know ya grew up there so ya probably don’t understand for shit, but I went there and I didn’t like it! And I know ya saved my life, I know! But that doesn’t change the fucken fact that I went to a place I wasn’t meant to be, and guess who dragged me there? Who else but you!”

The world around Loona felt hazy and distant, almost surreal like a daydream, or a fever. Millions of emotions ran through her, mostly confusion and fear, and what’s more was that words had

abandoned her. Loona was left stunned, helpless to say or do anything. Whether to lash out, scream, or even cry, Loona was unable to choose.

It seemed Jim didn't know what to do with himself either; "Fuck, I dunno. Just the thought we might be going through the same shit with you now, it just… I don't know what to make of it! Doesn't really click with me anymore, so I feel indifferent about it. Like I wanna help you, mate, I do! But I just don't have the energy to go the extra mile as of late, like— gah, fuck. … So I just tell ya all I can find."

If Loona was in her hellhound form, her ears would be folded all the way down. Pensiveness was rife within her, but steadily more so was agitation; "…So you're… you're drained, because of me? Is that what you're saying, that this is my fault?"

"Don't put words into my mouth," Jim pleaded, practically begging in a desperate fashion; "Don't do that."

Loona gripped her hair and vigorously shook her head. "Then just say what you mean," Loona demanded; "Just please, tell me the truth! I'm sick of being lied to by people, so just do that for me."

Jim took a moment to reflect, averting his eyes nowhere in particular. He kicked the ground weekly with the toe of his boot; "…I just want peace for us, that's all. That's why I tell ya simple things, I don't wanna complicate it. And I know you're far from okay, I know that! An-And yeah, maybe I have been dismissive and it's my fault that I've been doing that, but what else do I tell ya? I don't know what other words I can give ya to help you along, I'm lost."

The disguised hellhound again became flared up, even more so than before. She squinted hard at the human before her, peeling back her lips in the most hellhound way possible. It was like Loona had forgotten she was meant to act human; "You don't know what to give me?? How about just a little support, how's that for giving something! You're just, like- You're making out like I'm asking the goddamn world from you, when all I want is just a hand back for what I did for you! Please just-.. Agh, just no more of this empty "oh you'll be fine" bullshit, I want actual help! OH, and newsflash, wise guy; I'm pretty fucking tired too, so don't give me that shit!"

Again in a torturous feeling, neither of them knew what to say from then on; Loona stood there breathily laboriously, while Jim merely stared. As the young man stared into Loona's vibrant irises of red, he noticed the anger she withheld began to flicker. Her brow too twitched, letting go of the

furrow and up-turning into a weakened look. A thin glaze of tears then coated the whites of Loona's eyes. She looked helpless.

All in all Jim didn't know what to do, so he did the only thing he thought he could — a bare minimum. He outstretched his arms for a moment, palms open, then let them fall back to his sides; "I'm sorry."

Again, blanketing them both was deep, overwhelming muteness, consuming them like an invisible choking mist. Neither of them could see it, but they knew there was a gargantuan rift between them; the type to make or break any form of camaraderie.

And Loona submersed in meekness, despite her usual cynicism, had no intention to do the latter. She sighed shakily; "…It's fine. Okay, it's fine. I forgive you, but only if you just-… can I please just have more help? Like I know it maybe sounds selfish to you, but—"

"No," Jim interrupted calmly and full of humility, shaking his head; "Nah, I think you're entitled to ask for that. I'll do better, alright? I will."

Loona pursed her lips to this and let out a shuddering breath, the last of her anger having been expunged to much of her relief. It was what she ultimately wanted to hear out of all this, but at the same time she didn't exactly feel she deserved it, if at all. Tensely Loona squeezed her pale hands by her sides into fists, then released them, repeating this until she felt that she wouldn't lash out any further; there was no need to.

The energy between them was sickeningly awkward, still lingering with that odor of aggressive confrontation that at last had timely departed. Neither of them knew what to say, or do, to make the situation any better between them — Loona especially felt this. Yes, the troubled young woman had expressed herself as clearly as she liked, but she had no discernible idea of where to go from here. They couldn't exactly go about life as usual without saying or doing something to put a proper lid on it.

That's when Loona found herself doing something strange. She found herself moving slowly towards Jim, who seemed to be doing the same, like she was out of control of her own body. Loona only stopped when she was comfortably within arms reach of the fellow young adult, and she stood there blank-faced staring into him — Jim too was staring back. Then the disguised hound huffed through her nose, inexplicably opening up her arms; she couldn't believe she was willingly doing this.

And with that, in a slow and timid sort of progression, they warmly embraced. A proper hug. What's more to this rarer than rare gesture, especially from none other than Loona, neither of them really wanted to let go. A part of Loona blared at her to stop this 'bullshit', but this was drowned out completely by the most prominent part of her in that instance — the part that told her she needed this.

It was Jim who spoke up after the ten-second mark, whispering to Loona still comfortably in his arms; "Sorry for getting shitty."

But Loona shook her head against his chest, her silver mane of hair ruffling against his pale blue buttoned shirt. With her arms locked around him, the pale goth quietly said; "Sorry for dragging you down there. … I-I mean, I had second thoughts about it even when I did it. Just didn't know it would affect you this bad, you know?"

Jim huffed; "Well. I mean it did save my life in the end, didn't it?"

Loona thought about it for a second, and softly smiled; "Hmph. Yeah. It did, didn't it? … Guess I did good," she considered, still hugging tightly with no sign of letting go.

"You did," the young man replied in much the same tone.

Still they continued to hug indefinitely. In truth Loona felt strange, being this close to somebody and for so long, but at the same time she didn't want to relent. Her conviction from a little earlier was right; she did need this, perhaps far more than she first realized, or rather more than she was willing to admit. Something about the warmth of the hug made Loona feel fuzzy, somewhere inside her chest.

That's, when out of nowhere, the soon-to-be newly-minted babysitter remembered; "Uugh, fuuuuck…"

"What's up," Jim duly asked.

"Nothing," Loona winced; "Just remembered about the thing tomorrow…"

“The thi— oh, right. So how you feeling about it, still up to do it?”

With a sigh that suggested she was ‘sucking it up’, Loona said in defeat; “I gotta be, don’t I? Who knows, maybe it’ll be just fine. Probably overthinking, who the fuck knows… What time do I have to rock up there?”

Jim took a second to recall; “Around… one in the arvo, they said.”

“…Aight,” Loona nodded quietly; “…We can stop hugging now.”

The bushman’s mind was apparently much the same, and both him and the hellhound finally let go in unison. Tensions were now completely gone, and the pair of them were now on equal footing.

After letting go Loona visibly shuddered, obviously not used to that level of intimacy. She said as much; “Uff, shit that felt weird. You good?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” was Jim’s reply; “You?”

Loona paused for a second, an awkward sort of grin appearing before nodding; “Yea-Yeah, I’m fine! Just, uh… that was… that was nice. I liked it.”

“What, the hug?”

“Yeah. No wait, not the hug! Noh-Not just the hug, I mean like we made up, and we— I didn’t—” Loona was stumbling over herself hard, trying to save face as if she had just said something damaging. Unbeknownst to her, a blush had also begun to blemish her cheeks as well.

To save Loona the worry, Jim just smirked and nudged her in the arm; a signal to say that all was well between them again. This gave the disguised hound all the reassurance she needed, and she stopped trying to explain herself.

“So yeah, anyway,” Jim grunted, turning back to the street-end of the alleyway; “What were ya saying about that guy, where is he?”

This snapped Loona back to the whole reason she ran out; “The guy? Agh- Don’t worry about it, man, he’s long gone by now. Let’s just, like, focus on tomorrow, getting my life in order.”

“Fair nuff. Your call,” Jim conceded, following by her side as they began to leave; “Sure you’re okay?”

Loona drew a sharp breath, still feeling the shakes from pouring out her feelings; “Yeah, I think so. Thanks for, uh, listening. I’m glad you did.”

“Nah it’s fine, I think I owed you that. … Sure you don’t wanna chase after him?”

“Jim.”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up.”

The midnight silence that plagued the lower floors of Hades’ most notorious prisons was deafening, as was the darkness which choked even the dimmed overhanging lights that produced a thin orange haze. Everyone in their cells in that long three-storey hall — of imps, hellhounds, incubus, and everything in between — were sound asleep, as comfortable as anyone could within their roughened bunks. The massive, towering arched window at the far end of the cell block allowed the pale orange Wrath moon to shine through, casting a faint peach shimmer on all three floors. Not a single person stirred at that hour, and all was eerily silent.

Except for Blitz, who had stayed up to read in his cell; at least he tried to. Blitz had the luxury of staying up after hours in his cell on the lowest floor, seeming that the prison warden had “kindly” designated a cell all to himself. What’s more to this deal, they had allowed him to keep *‘Crime and*

Punishment', the novel which up until that night he hadn't actually ever read. Now that he was imprisoned, Blitz had all the time in the world to read; or at least attempt to.

Blitz knew that he was all by himself, all sheltered up on his back within that lonely bunk; in fact he was sure of it until he felt another presence in the far corner of the room. He noticed just out of the corner of his eye, a very familiar figure sitting in the cell's only chair and table, occupying it like it was nobody else's business. Whoever it was, was lounging there arrogantly, as if by chance that he were to be told to move, he would spit right at the opponent's feet.

Whatever doubt Blitz had of the figure's identity vanished when it spoke, sporting his father's voice; "Still tryna read that damn thing?"

Blitz said nothing, and continued trying to read the second last page of chapter one.

Cash, with an uncaring look on his grizzled old face, prodded on; "Hey, jackass. I'm talkin' to ya. I know your ass can hear me, so quit pretending."

Still, Blitz ignored him.

Cash snorted and leaned back in the only wooden chair in the entire cell, throwing one leg over the other knee. Then he began to sing, in a low gravelly hum; "Ooohhh~ When folks who still can ride in jitneys, find out Vanderbilts and Whitneys, lack baby clooothes… anything goes—"

"Momma used to like that song." — It seemed his ever-so understanding father's quiet taunting vocals was enough to prompt Blitz to speak. Indeed he had been listening the entire time.

A devious, provocative grin stained Cash's gross crooked lips; "Oh-ho yeah? Ya recognize it, huh?"

"Surer than shit," Blitz murmured dismissively, then after much battle with the printed words flipped to the final page of the first chapter.

To the very much but debatably sane imp's relief, his father seemed to run out of steam for the time being. Instead Cash leant back in the lonely chair, the timber backrest creaking against the shifting

weight.

Cash couldn't just leave his son alone, even at his lowest point; "Gotta hand it to ya, son. Got yourself into a hot old mess here. An' over what? Some goddamn mangy hellhound—"

The book in Blitz's hands slammed shut; "The fuck's your problem, jackass?" Blitz snarled and gritted his teeth, his focus now firmly on his father now that he had given in.

Cash furrowed his brow; "My problem? The only problem 'round here is the one ya caused yourself. Went around shooting folks willy-nilly, now look atcha! All alone in a shitty cell in one of hell's most guarded prisons. What's more, you're earmarked to get shot! Wanna talk about problems, there's one for ya."

Blitz sneered; "Yeah, well, I got caught!"

"'Cause of your clumsiness," Cash added without hesitation, his widened deadpan eyes bulging out to the offspring he considered a failure.

The Buckzo junior locked his mouth tight for a second, trying to figure out some sort of comeback; "You're a— Yo-You know what, you're a—… Fu-Fuck off," he eventually replied brimming with anger, then spat across the room at his father.

The large gob of saliva landed squarely at Cash's boots, a good shot considering Blitz's laying position from his lonely bunk. Blitz considered it a victory in his own mind, though Cash probably didn't quite see it as a defeat; in his father's mind, as much as Blitz figured, he was continually winning.

In his infuriating fashion Cash paid no reaction to Blitz's lashing out, still lounging on the chair with his legs splayed out straight and arms folded. He tilted his head back to look skywards, finding not a sky but a darkened gray ceiling, the light off. "Welp," Cash wheezed with a light cough; "Guess we're stuck here together, 'til your big day."

"Like fuck I am! You're not even here," Blitz rebuked from his bunk, having hunched himself into a ball and lay on his side. He was facing away from the figure of his father, facing one of the four stale, unforgiving walls of his cell.

Cash brought his head back to hell, looking at his son with a raised brow; “I’m not?”

“Don’t give me that, asshole,” Blitz hissed, still facing squarely away; “You know you’re nothing but a figure of my imagination, I know you are! Yo-You’re a hallucination to torment me, while the real you is out there, whoring out women and drinking until you pass out, like the miserable old alcoholic shitbag you are.”

“Who says I’m still doin’ that,” Cash questioned, seemingly beginning to allude to something; “What if I’m actually here, sitting here in… well, not exactly the flesh anymore.”

Blitz laughed; “HA, fuck off! What the fuck are ya tryna say, you’re a— hah— you’re a ghost? That’s the reason why you vanish in and out of existence all the time, like some fucking phantom??”

Cash suddenly fell mute, the gall to speak having inexplicably failed him. It left Blitz with an at first joking question that grew into a serious one, motivating the imp to turn back around in his bunk. He looked at his father with a second-guessing expression.

Cash sighed through his nostrils, repositioning his legs to have them crossed over one another. “I learnt somethin’ a couple weeks ago,” the ex-ringmaster slurred, scratching the roots of his white goatee; “Yanno we don’t actually die? Well we do more or less, but we actually sleep. See when we kick the bucket, our bodies get shriveled, decompose, n’ all that shit, but that’s just our bodies. Us, ourselves, we actually sleep. And sometimes, for one reason or another, we wake up. I’ve been told it don’t happen often, but it does every once in a while.”

“Uh-huh, likely story,” Blitz dismissed, only half-believing what Cash was telling him; “So tell me then, ‘Ghost Cash’, how’d you go out?”

“Remember Jemimah? That working lady I hired shortly before you ran from home,” Cash began to tell, trying to jog Blitz’s memory; “Well I tried to advance on her about a couple weeks ago, one night when I was pretty drunk. I got a slit throat in return.”

“Oho, that’s awesome! Serves you right, you old prick,” Blitz taunted, celebrating the news with glee.

“Yeah yeah, whatever,” Cash waved his hand away; “But that’s beside the point! Apparently I’m stuck being ‘awake’ to fulfill some sort of purpose that I’ve gotta figure out, and I guess that means I’m stuck here with you. That’s what I was told anyway, by the thing that woke me up.”

“Ohh, just my luck,” Blitz groaned, thumping his head against the wall; “Well tell that ‘thing’ to fuck right off, and put you back to sleep.”

The older imp in the room let out a wheezing chuckle. “Well see I told it that,” Cash explained; “Told me that it wouldn’t. Said to me that it needed me to help ya, an’ that I didn’t have a choice in the matter. Said somethin’ about your daughter, Lola, or whatever her name is.”

Blitz suddenly shot upright in his bunk, now wide awake; “Loona..?”

“Yeah, her,” Cash said, again dismissively; “Apparently it knows her. Said that it’s been ‘awake’ far longer than I have, an’ it won’t rest until it’s satisfied. I asked what it meant by that, but it didn’t tell me. Just said that it was none of my concern, and that it only needed me for a short while. An’ I’m here to tell ya, well at least that ‘thing’ wants me to tell ya, that you’re gonna get outta here.”

“And how am I gonna do that,” Blitz questioned, finding it unlikely in his state. He gestured widely to his cell; “Look at this! You think I’m gonna get outta this, anytime soon?”

Cash shrugged; “Fuck if I know. But it’s gonna happen apparently, somehow. You’re just gonna have to… I dunno, do whatever ya do in these situations.”

“Wow, really helpful. Thanks, father dearest,” Blitz sarcastically quipped, letting his head fall into his hands. A yawn escaped through his mouth, almost echoing in his cell with how loud it was.

Sleep was beginning to set in now that Blitz had been long since distracted from reading. But even with eyelids becoming heavy, and the familiar feeling of his body working overtime setting in, Blitz felt the need to remain awake, considering that the apparent ghost of his father was still with him.

Cash of course noticed this change, taking it as an opportunity to quip; “Tired from reading, huh? Shit, I’m not surprised. Ya never read a day in your life, n’ that’s probably my fault.”

Blitz snickered weakly with disdain; “Finally admitting fault for something. Well fuck, you really are a hallucination.”

“Whatever ya wanna call me, boy, I don’t care,” Cash told his son; “What’s real is real, what’s fake is fake. Ya just gotta figure out what’s real, an’ what’s not. Anyway, figure it out in the morning. Sleep on what I told ya, and maybe you’ll find a way to get outta here, somehow.”

Although Blitz responded to this with a mere uneven drowsy blink, he begrudgingly knew that ‘father dearest’ had given actual solid advice. If only Cash had given that sort of advice when he was alive, maybe the trajectory of his son’s life would’ve been way different.

And so the prisoner lay back in his bunk, pressing his back into the hardened mattress dressed in a depressing gray cover and blanket. “You’re not gonna try anything when I’m sleeping, right,” Blitz asked out of precaution, not that he would ever trust his father’s word.

Cash knew this too, but he said anyway; “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Blitz had no other choice but to “trust” Cash’s word, and decided to finally tuck himself in for the night. Once in, he set ‘Crime and Punishment’ on the rugged side table to his left, the makeshift paper bookmark slotted into the beginning of chapter two. When he did this, Blitz noticed that the chair which he had found Cash in was now empty, the specter having vanished for the second time. The imp didn’t know what to make of it, but he was glad to have his father out of his sight, taunting him by his presence alone.

Before Blitz could finally fall asleep, head on pillow and all, Cash’s disembodied voice sounded off again, hushed but clear; “Ey. Ya wanna hear something even more nuts? … You know how we’re taught that the Sins made us, and whatnot? Apparently that’s bullshit.”

“Huh. Right,” Blitz mumbled, only half paying attention. He felt himself fall into unconsciousness.

Withering

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A week was only two days away from having passed, and the trajectory of Millie's life had somewhat stabilized. It wasn't the same as it was, no, but nevertheless she at least had a welcoming roof over her head, and a whole small cottage on her family's ranch to herself. She had a great deal of independence, having clawed up the last remnants of IMP's final pay into a barely satisfactory savings arrangement. Millie's life, however, was still very much at a low point.

What's more, on top of this little merciful deal, Moxxie had finally come back after days of being away. His return dampened the blow of being left unemployed, coupled by the fact that Moxxie had apparently found employment, explaining his absence. He said that it was a low-level assistant accounting job, overviewing finances of a business selling some sort of "intercourse enhancing drug" connected to the Lust ring. Millie didn't have the strength to question it, her usual energy having been very much dampened, or at the very worst completely extinguished. All in all, she just wanted her life back.

Millie sat on the side of the steel-framed king-sized bed, staring blankly towards the ground. She had just woken up from a seven-hours-worth night sleep, the first night spent together with Moxxie in this little cottage of theirs. Moxxie had already gone to the kitchen, so it gave Millie time to numb away from the anguish she was still reeling from. While she sat there staring off into the lightly dust-frosted wooden floor, the wrath imp heard her husband quietly tampering away in the kitchen, porcelain gently clattering as they were shifted around.

At some point Moxxie trotted back to the bedroom, finding his wife sitting idly on the bedside — he had brought some coffee, one for either of them. He exhaled softly through his nose, and found the courage to speak; "You okay, hun?"

Millie didn't speak, more rather hummed an indiscernible tone as a response. Her 'response' wasn't even much of one either, in fact it sounded distant and barren of attention.

This wasn't a good start to the morning, needless to say. Moxxie's face became flushed with pity, and he said further; "I brought coffee. Extra sugar, as you like it."

"That's nice," Millie meagrely squeaked, still avoiding any form of meaningful eye contact. A faint, extremely brief smile did appear however in a short reflection of her usual self, so brief that

her husband almost missed it.

But Moxxie was no fool. He knew his wife was hurting from the whole ‘being made redundant’ thing, caused partly by his own choices. Her smile was feigned, and so as well was her flicker of weak enthusiasm — this wasn’t like her at all.

Gingerly Moxxie trod over beside Millie, and sat himself down right beside her. He set aside both mugs of searing coffee on the foot of the bed, balancing them on its flat surface. With hands free he offered a palm for Millie’s own pair to rest within, timidly outstretching them; “It’s gonna be okay. I promise,” Moxxie tried to soothe.

Dishearteningly, Millie shook her head. “But it’s not gonna be the same,” she croaked; “It’s never gonna be the same, Mox’. You know this. IMP was my independence, my chance to prove myself that I’m not just some mood-swingin’ harlot with a knife. … And now it’s gone.”

Moxxie didn’t know what to say to this. Not that he didn’t have an idea, more rather he knew that whatever he did have to say would more than likely make things worse. One idea he had was to bring his “accounting job,” and the drastic improvement in pay he received from it — now that would be a peace-killer.

Snapping the son of Greed from his speechlessness was what Millie sheepishly asked, the question barely above a whisper; “Where were you?”

Moxxie blinked; “Where was I,” he repeated, hoping she wasn’t asking what he thought she was.

“This new job of yours. Those past few days, after we moved out,” Millie added, and for the first time that morning she looked at her husband. But this wasn’t a look of warmth, rather that of begging for an answer; “You said it was for your new job, right? Interviews don’t take days away. So where were you?”

The question had just been asked. Moxxie, now truly put on the spot, didn’t have an immediate answer. He did, but the truth wasn’t anything that Millie was willing to hear. What was he supposed to tell her, that he had inherited his father’s empire of dirt? That he was the head of Greed’s largest mafia now? She couldn’t take that, not with the heartbreak she already had endured — Moxxie cursed Blitz’s name for that since that day. Wherever he was now, Moxxie hoped that he was living through his own personal hell.

Like her husband, Millie was no fool either. Somehow she knew that he was up to something, but she couldn't find it within herself to pursue it; she couldn't find the courage. "Mgh- Forget it," she said dishearteningly, when Moxxie failed to provide an answer.

Without even asking for her husband's assistance, Millie stretched herself behind him and grabbed one of the coffee mugs. Sitting herself back upright, she took a sip, feeling the just about piping hot, dense liquid slide down her throat. Moxxie had in fact made it exactly how she liked it; extra sugar, a three-to-one ratio compared to the smaller granules of coffee put in.

Millie gazed sadly into the inky vat of coffee, the color barely brightened by the mere morsel of milk thrown in. She saw her glum reflection staring back at her, tired and submersed in a dark veil of coffee — it captured her emotions perfectly, as if the universe itself in all of its mysteries knew. Any more pure ground coffee added to her morning drink, and it would really look like Millie was staring into the abyss.

"Why did ya have to say anythin'," Millie asked wearily, still gazing into her drink; "Ya could've just let him blow off. Like for fuck sake, he just lost his daughter to a bunch of thugs. Why couldn't ya have just given him that, the right to mourn?"

"The right to— Millie, sweetheart, he-…" — The urge for Moxxie to desperately defend himself was overpowering, but so much more was the sheer look Millie was giving him. She had a way with looks, but this very specific "firm but demoralized" look had a whole new untouched power that Moxxie had never seen before. He stifled himself at once; "…Maybe… Maybe you're right. Maybe I should've just let him-… But I-… No. No, I should've. I-I know."

"You're not lyin' to me, right," Millie asked unexpectedly; "About knowin'? Like, you're not just agreeing with me 'cause I want ya to?"

Moxxie was left taken aback. In fact, he was almost heartbroken; "What? Millie, why would you— why would I ever lie to you? I-I've never lied to you, Mills, why would I do that? I-I'd have betrayed you if I… if I ever did."

There was a very unusual sort of tension between Millie and Moxxie, beginning to manifest itself in the midst of this uneven form of conversation. If it had a scent, which it very almost did, it would smell like perishables right before they venture beyond their expiry date — a fouling, off-putting sort of smell, muddying anything and everything around them like a contagious virus. This wasn't

the conversation of a married couple, but that much more like of two friends, their bond beginning to fray at the seams. In one way or another, this was very much a test of the seams' own strength.

Wholehearted was the discomfort Moxxie felt, staring right into Millie's gaze now looking back at him. He tried his best not to squirm, to keep the peace between them, as was both of their best interests. He managed to break through the awkwardness with a few words; "Can I make it up to you? This whole mess, I mean. Be-Because that's what this is, just a whole big mess."

Millie pursed her lips at this, and shook her head with anguish. "Just promise me we'll get through this," she begged; "Together."

All that Moxxie could do was grab Millie's free hand, raising it up on the pedestal that was his own palm. Squeezing his faithful wife's hand to assure her, he said with the best smile he could muster; "I promise."

Thnk-Thnk-Thnk-Thnk! — A series of hearty knocks came the direction of the cottage's front door, loud and vigorous. Then came Sallie May's muffled voice, hollering out from just outside; *"Ey, Sis! Come check this out!"*

Millie's posture shot upright, clambering together as much attention as she could; "Wh-uh-What's goin' on," she called out in due time.

"Just come look! Some weird shit's goin' down," Sallie May hollered again.

Confusion was rampant between the cottage's inhabiting couple, who gave each other lost glances before getting up together. Their coffee mugs, still simmering away, were left behind as if forgotten. What exactly the "weird shit going down" was became clear the moment they stepped outside.

It was Millie who led the charge, opening the door to sure enough find Sallie May standing on the other side, looking positively perturbed. Her attention wasn't even focused on her sister, rather something on the outskirts of the ranch, just beyond the fence line. In fact Sallie May's focus on whatever was going on was so intense, that when she turned around to find Millie staring back, she jumped with surprise.

“Wha-What’s goin’ on,” Millie pressed, still trying to rub the sleep from her eyes.

“Somethin’ really fucking weird, let’s just say that,” Sallie May relayed, pointing sharply towards the main entry and exit of the property, behind the family house; “Look!”

And so Millie looked over, squarely following Sallie May’s pinpoint finger dead-on the target. Sure enough, she did find the “weird shit” that was happening, and for sure as shit was, it didn’t bode well.

On the pathway leading into the ranch, just beyond the fence, was a convoy. It wasn’t just any old convoy, but rather something evidently military. Millie recognized exactly what they were; it was a ten-strong column of eight-wheeled armored cars, painted a camouflage of yellow, orange, and red, matching the punishing terrain of Wrath. They all had a low-profile turret on the top, each of them sporting a long barrel facing urgently forwards. None of them were moving, as guarding the entry and exit was the staunch, white-haired patriarch of the family with hands in his pockets — beside him in much the same unwavering stance, was his wife.

There was another figure towering over them; a uniformed Sinner, dressed in a sandy-colored tunic, pants, and black jackboots. A visor cap was perched tall on his head, his face resembling a sharp-toothed humanoid. By the sound of his distant, urgent barking off to Millie and Sallie May’s father, the convoy as a whole was here on serious business.

“What in sam hill—” Millie gasped in disbelief, and without consulting with neither sister or husband, she dashed off to confront the situation herself.

The platoon leader clad in sand-khaki was in the heat of battle, that of a very verbal nature; “For zhe last time, Sir, we need to be let through your property! It’s strictly the high command’s orders, zhey won’t have it any other way!”

The miniature war in its own right, the ‘Battle for Joe’s Ranch’, had been waging on for the betterment of ten minutes now. It had dragged on for so long at this point, that all ten of the armored cars’ engines had been switched to idle, their respective commanders perched atop the turrets to see what was going on. Some of them had even begun to smoke cigars to pass the time. The commanders of the two armored cars in the center had gotten out to play a light game of poker.

It was the little ranch man, the head of the family named ‘Joe’, who was the thorn in the war machine’s side. Joe, being a formidable opponent, was an immovable object; “Well tell your stinkin’ high command you’re not cuttin’ through mah ranch! Radio ‘em in or whatnot, see if I care!”

Resisting the urge not to tear his own face off, the Sinner drenched in stress-fueled sweat bemoaned; “Sir, I assure you, zhat won’t end well for you! I want zhis to be ended as peacefully as possible, so if you’d let us through, we can forget this—”

Joe practically exploded; “Forget?! Your motherfuckin’ tire tracks are gonna be a rude reminder your sorry kraut asses were ever here! Now I’m tellin’ ya, turn this fuckin’ no-good, piece-o’-ass convoy ‘round, an’ go back from where ya came!”

The platoon commander, looking just about ready to explode, pleaded; “Sir, please, you are pushing me to zhe edge here. Think about yourself, your family! Zhis won’t end well for them!”

“I beg ya— D-Did you just— Are you threatenin’ mah family, you jackass?!”

“PA!!” — Before anything could escalate any further than it already had, Millie bellowed out to make herself known. She was running as fast as she could, skidding to a stop just before the Sinner standing over them.

Joe whipped around to find his daughter, panting from her sprint; “What-the— Get back inside, Mills, ah got this!”

But Millie wasn’t listening, she had seen far too much; “What’s goin’ on here, Pa, what is this??”

“Your old man, ma’am, is refusing to let us through,” the now flustered-faced platoon commander spat, ridding his forehead from sweat with the back of his hand.

A vein burst in Joe’s temple; “Don’t ya DARE talk to mah daughter!!”

The Sinner however did, ignoring Joe completely. He revealed a slip of white paper which he pulled from inside his tunic, waving it with firm conviction of its power; “Look! I have orders und a permit here to pass through your property, as zhere is a *very clear* through-road zhat runs through to zhe other side! Now if your father here would just listen, we wouldn’t be having this—”

“Ohh I am listenin’, boah, and mah answer is no! Ya ain’t cutting through mah property, deutschbag, an’ that’s final!”

“Erschießen Sie einfach den verdammten Idioten, Felix!!” — A shrill, evidently fed-up voice came from the stalled convoy, the voice belonging to one of the poker players. From the sounds of things, whatever he had said spoke boldly of a quick solution.

Whether it was a logical solution or not, it didn’t matter, as the leader of the detachment merely glanced at the interjector with a look of ‘shut up’. Once given his commanding glare, platoon commander ‘Felix’ turned back around, and said with a far more stifled manner; “None of you know what you’re holding up here. We’re not cutting through your property under undue duress. We’re doing zhis under an emergency direction given to us by the high command.”

Millie, who had only just been thrown into the loop, wasn’t any closer to having a clue what this was all about. She stammered; “Emergency direct— What emergency direction??”

“Zhe battalion to which ve belong to has been ordered to guard the through passageway checkpoint between Greed and Gluttony. A section of that same road cuts through Wrath, just north of here; I’m sure you’re all familiar vith it. Travelling on zhe main route would take us forty minutes, but cutting through here cuts that travel time by fifteen. I cannot tell you why, but I can tell you zhat holding us up here undermines the security and safety of this region!”

“Then jus’ take the main route then,” Millie loudly exclaimed, the whole situation still making no sense to her; “As ya said, it’s only forty minutes! What’s the big deal?”

“Leaving zhe stability of zhis realm on tenterhooks, that’s zhe big deal!”

A Wrath buzzard let out a haunting, eerie cry as it flew off, flying away from the echo of the Sinner’s bellow. Millie meanwhile was dead silent, as was her parents who continued to stare down the taller intruder.

Evidently having made his point clear, the Sinner who now had utmost control elaborated. He told of a harrowing warning; “None of you know vhat could be coming, und that’s for good reason! You might’ve heard it on zhe news, relations between Greed and Gluttony are not well. Zhe battalion I belong to is all that stands in zhe way of a catastrophe spreading across the rings. Vhat I can order for all of you on grounds of sabotaging military movements, is *nothing* compared to what might be coming. I tell you all nothing but the truth, as I understand it.”

The household had in fact heard the news of souring Greed-Gluttony relations, as had most of the ring at that point. Millie had only heard mere blips of it, fractions of information that could be easily dismissed as simple, ancient, squabbling politics. But seeing it now firsthand, manifesting into the standoff happening before her at the gates of her home no less, made it all the more real. “Simple, ancient, squabbling politics” didn’t require the movements of armed forces. A cycle was beginning to come around again.

“Let ‘em through,” Millie found herself saying in a dampened manner, staring down the column of armored cars.

Joe peered wide-eyed at her daughter; “What?! Millie, they’re—”

Millie snapped her head towards her father; “Just let them through, pa!” Frustrated was the tone which she delivered onto the patriarch of the ranch, every breath underlined with a hiss. “Let’s just be done with this! Let these rotten sons-o’-bitches through so they can get out of our hair! Less time they’re here, the better!”

The look Joe gave to his daughter was like he wasn’t looking at the same person anymore. His Millie had become nothing like he had known, submitting to complete strangers invading her home all through the power of some mere slips of paper. It baffled Joe completely, but he could see the underlying exhaustion that permeated through his daughter’s being. The whole ‘being unemployed’ thing hadn’t been easy on her. Millie didn’t want a fight, and in all honesty with himself, her father didn’t want one either.

Cupping his fingers around his jaw with indecision, Joe looked back to the still convoy, from which all eyes were awaiting his verdict. The imp of advancing years then looked to his wife, who looked back to him with the same indecision he was feeling. It was this mutual stuckage between him and his wife that made up the male imp’s conflicted mind. Biting his lip, Joe huffed and in a monumental step against his key principles, cleared the way. To top it all off, he couldn’t bring himself to say anything on his verdict.

“Thank you,” the Sinner commander expressed his gratitude, though his tone didn’t proclaim any victory over anyone; “We didn’t vant to invade your home, we’re only following—”

“Jus’ get this shit heap movin’,” Joe interrupted in his gruff demeanor like his lack of height didn’t matter, wanting nothing more to do with this. He sounded utterly defeated; “When ya get to the other side, just close the gate behind ya.”

It was from this final instruction onward that converse between Sinner and imp came to its tense but relieving conclusion. With a quick turn the platoon’s brains returned to the leading armored car, signaling for the others to return to their stations; it was time to go.

There came a chorus of engines, at first choking and spluttering before roaring to life with brutish horsepower and strength, ample enough to propel the steel sarcophaguses they were caged within. The noise was deafening, drowning out any and all sound that existed in the immediate area, and echoing across the eerie, dusty, ancient plains of Wrath. One by one the ten-strong armored convoy passed underneath the ranch’s timber gates, lumbering with all of their weight across the through-road’s dusty surface like a line of giant pack animals.

Joe could only watch with agony and disdain as the convoy invaded his property, but he knew he held no power against them. He huddled with his wife who sought comfort in him against the display, comfort in which he most certainly gave; he needed some himself.

Millie meanwhile was glad to see it over and done with, eagerly watching the steel juggernauts crawl past the house along the road. In due time they got further and further into the distance, dragging their awful noise with them until it was nothing more than a haunting distant echo. A stranger encounter the ranch had never witnessed before — something was up, something large. Distant, but fast approaching.

Turning her attention away from the departed convoy, Millie looked back towards the cottage. There stood Moxxie who had stayed behind by the door; he too was watching the intruders, carefully. But seldom did he look back to his wife. Figuratively, literally, whichever; Moxxie looked more distant than ever.

“NO!! You listen to me, you bacon-fed daw, you order them to turn back this instant!” Lucifer’s grating, booming voice, charred by century after century echoed through his office, into the

receiver he so angrily held.

The emergency phone call between himself and Mammon had been going on for nigh on five minutes, and there was no sign of relenting from the Lord of Greed; his block-headed conviction that military manoeuvres were necessary was ironclad. It was official; Greed would protect its interests on the borders of Gluttony. An embargo of all things financial was now in order.

Hearing Mammon's attempt to justify himself, the king of Hades' teeth clenched ever tighter. "WHY!! Wherefore do you and Bee ***INSIST*** on making things yond much more tedious for me?! This isn't needed, Mammon! This isn't!!"

The cadaverous lines and crevices that cracked the fallen one's face grew longer when he heard Mammon blither on further. His accent and tone was incredibly punishing to hear, especially in his childish outbursts. The decrepit king groaned loudly; "How many instances upon which must I tell you?! **We cannot *afford* this disunity!** There cannot, and will not, be another war between you two! Not again! Need I remind you what happened to the king of Wrath, what I did to him?!"

Only at this reminder did the "unstoppable" tide of war seem to wither. The power to which the reminder of a history since passed withheld was like the threat of war itself; in this case, one way or another, it most certainly was. Mammon's bluster of verbal sabres and threats of affirmative action subsided for a bout of grovelling; words of apology, of misunderstanding, of assurances that he only wanted to protect what is his.

The wretched king of Hades took no pleasure in this sudden change in rhetoric. Sipping a flask of only Wrath's strongest whiskey with ice, he growled once more into the phone; "Dampen thyself, Mammon, for it will be your undoing! It's already cost thee a hand, need I remind you. If thee must, station your troops fifteen miles from the border, and no more. Any more, and mark mine own utterances, I shall give the Shoktrup full authority to destroy your men! I shall instruct the Queen of Gluttony to do the same. … Yes, the embargo can continue! But no— **NO — FUCKING — *WAR!!"***

Great force came down on the archaic telephone when the receiver was slammed back down on its hook, the bell jingling bluntly in a broken note. The devil's will was clear; would be no war amongst the realms — for now. Spindly white fingers met their owner's forehead, so as to wipe away the agitated sweat that had built throughout the duration of the phone call. Dealing with Mammon was akin to running a mile, exhaustion and all. But as the saying went; there was no rest for the wicked, especially the wickedest one of them all. He had to confide with someone, urgently.

Getting up was a chore for the old wretched king, as had been for centuries, the deep scar across his back panging especially hard this time around. From study to hallway did the king of Hades tread, hobbling along across the lonely desolate chasms of his enormous palace; whereas a palace would display celebration of those who reigned within its walls, the Grand Palace of all-Hades withheld no such boasting. There was nothing to boast about.

Down went the fallen one, down a broad, winding stone staircase cutting deep into Hades' foul soil. The stone-carved balustrades winding down along with the stairs had carved within them archaic, long-forgotten patterns; the thick stone railing itself fashioned into a gray, scaly, long serpent, or a dragon. Long was the descent, but time didn't matter in a place like this, or to a "ruler" so withering as he.

A tall arched entrance way met Hades' decrepit "ruler" at the bottom of the descent, its thick stone rim scribed with long-forgotten runes and symbols with a meaning seldom known. Shuffling unceremoniously through the entrance way, the fallen one stepped forth onto the ancient stone brick bridge erected over the most harrowing, most chasmic bottomless chamber in all of Hades. The bottom was invisible to the naked eye, if there was a bottom to begin with in that hauntingly massive chamber, made even more so by the thick putrid fog that swirled like a massive spectre several feet below. The only sort of light that only barely lit up the dark bottomless cavern were the brass torches lining the bridge, billowing out a supernatural, cold, blue flame of light. This chamber below the Grand Palace was where hope came to die, if by the most improbable chance such a thing as 'hope' had ever lived there to begin with.

In the middle of this giant, hopeless chamber was an island of dark stone suspended in thin air, floating on its own supernatural will. Built on this island was a massive wall, but not just any wall — it was a wall of graves, towering several storeys high, up and up towards the ceiling that too was out of sight. Vaults, hundreds of them, filled with the bodies of those who had served the disgraced one as his courtier over the centuries. Hundreds there had been, and hundreds more would come.

The king of Hades' footsteps echoed like pebbles tumbling down a deep shaft, his black-polished shoes introducing themselves to the floating island's cold surface — as cold as death. Ponderously Lucifer looked up at the towering monolithic structure, analyzing the hundreds of graves which housed his former courtiers. Inscribed on the stonework of each vault was a name, heralding who was tombed in where.

Amidst all of these graves, the king of Hades was only looking for one. He found it in short time, as it was the first vault ever erected on that hopeless, floating island, right in the bottom center of the gigantic wall of the dead. This tomb was different from the rest, as a round series of small holes had been drilled into the stonework. Having found it, Lucifer approached the first-ever tomb that stood to his eye level. He looked eagerly at it, and the name etched into the stone: ***"Oaeke."***

The wretched king's fingers rapped against the panel four times in fatigued succession: ***"Tik — Tik — Tik — Tik."*** An echo from inside the tomb and round about followed immediately after, heralding the knock.

Leaning towards the cluster of precisely-drilled holes, the fallen one beckoned in a sickly drawl. He spoke in a language, ancient and spine-chilling; *"Awaken, Oaeke, thou most loyal servant of mine."*

At first, and as expected from anyone sane enough, there came no reply from the tomb, or from any of the others. Of course that would be the case, as only death reigned supreme underneath the stone of the Grand Palace, being the vast crypt it was. But after a while, something truly astonishing happened — The most chilling, raspy voice echoed from inside the tomb in the same archaic language, muffled but coherent; *"How is it that I can serve thee, your lordship?"*

"I come to thee with trouble about," the fallen one explained his presence, having expected the reply; *"As thou were my most trusted servant, as you shall always be so, I beckon for thou input."*

"But I am past my expiry, am I not," the long-deceased Courtier Oaeke asked, vocals strained and tired; *"What use am I for such modern times?"*

"Of much use," the withering king of Hades assured; *"If this were not true, I would never hath awoken thee from thou slumber. You, mine most loyal Oaeke, are indeed required."*

"Very well," Oaeke abided from within his stone vault, a raspy rattle like a futile, lungless attempt at breath hissing through the holes; *"And what exactly troubles you so?"*

"I'm afraid," the rotten, gaunt-faced "ruler" relayed, straightening up his crooked and ghoulish posture; *"That the realms are once more, for the umpteenth occasion, threatened with war. Their lordships of Greed and Gluttony again see themselves at odds. If it were not for mine own intervention, the realms as we speak would be in a state of war."*

"Such childishness," the voice of a Courtier long-deceased emanated again. He sounded to be familiar with such context; *"Yes, your lordship, I remember such childishness well. From the very beginning. Unbecoming of either of them. Do forgive me for wondering, your lordship, but wouldn't this be a matter to discuss with Mister Tarenk?*"

“Aye, it would be so,” the fallen one nodded, looking up into the vast, dark nothingness of the chamber; *“But this is a matter I, mine own self, can only trust with thee. … Oaeke, I am considering instating the Regency Act on either of them.”*

“Either of them, your lordship,” Oaeke raspily repeated, almost asking.

“Aye,” the wretched king nodded slowly, at last looking back to the tomb of his first courtier; *“Mine own mind entertains such solution. Indeed my patience with them has been most generous over the course of centuries, but I grow weary. Tiresome. Like dealing with babes that refuse to progress beyond childishness, I grow exhausted.”*

“But such tolerance shall persevere,” the entombed courtier beckoned; *“It must. Stability must continue.”*

“But no such stability exists,” the fallen one spat, a fuse within him threatening to be set alight; *“Why, such stability of which thou speaketh and that of which thou knoweth wanes and withers like a dying tide! Nay such life perseveres within yond ‘stability’ of which thou speaketh, as much as it is agony for me to so proclaim! Why must thou be so blind, so unknowing to this fact?!”*

At first there came no immediate answer to this loaded question from the original courtier, the sarcophagus returning to its naturally dead state. But things such as the logical state of things didn’t exist down here, and soon after came Oaeke’s reply; *“Nay, I am not ignorant to this fact. But in all due respect, your lordship, one must maintain his foothold and be stalwart with the continuation of his realms. One must be reminded that he, indeed, is by the name of Sat—”*

“DO NOT DISGRACE ME WITH SUCH NAME!!” **—** The wretched one’s feeble body shook by the might of his anger, his cry echoing across the bottomless and celingless chamber. He had made his feelings known, as he had done so numerous times before; nobody under him would disgrace him.

Again the entire cavern fell silent when the echo of vitriol settled, falling into the vast bottomless pit below. Like hope, protest too died down there, even from Hades’ first prisoner.

That dreadful cavern, however, allowed for Oaeke to give a rather different point of view; *“Perhaps, your lordship, this trial of stability hasn’t emerged from nothing. Or perhaps, not of the cause to which you so confidently assume.”*

Lucifer looked inquisitively to the talking grave; *"Of what meaning do thou tell me this?"*

"Is it not true you exiled that of a lower being, barely a week ago?"

"...It be true," the fallen one said, starting to wonder what exactly the point was.

"Therein lies the problem, your lordship," Oaeke hissed from within his grave; *"Exiled, but not dispatched. Given the liberty to live evermore. Homeless and banished, yes, but not vanquished. What is not dealt with by the strongest of resolves is left to fester. And thus, the seeds of doubt and instability infect the fabric of these very realms. Something, your lordship, must be done about her."*

The point comprehensively put forward to Lucifer hadn't been realized up until then. Out of some lapse of judgment, the idea that the Sins saw weakness in his verdict of that hellhound had never crossed his mind. It was a good point, and the withering one said as much; *"...Perhaps, mine most loyal Oaeke, thou point is most valid. But even so, the lady is banished! The act of exiling that harlot is sure to deplete her. Soon mortality shall make itself known."*

"But she shall persevere in spite, your lordship."

"…What."

"Her order of exile has been sabotaged, your lordship. Hades no longer matters to the hellhound, her connection to this realm has been severed — of the prince of all-goetia's and the Queen of Gluttony's design. Yes, she shall fall ill, but it shall not be of your liking. The punishment has been ordered in vain. Sabotage has occurred, something must be done. A show of force, of affirmation of this realm's ideals for all of its inhabitants, and especially for those who have since left. It should indeed be so."

The fallen one didn't know what to make of this. Anger, confusion, fear, and doubt all arose as one inside his mind, realizing an "old problem" into a rejuvenated crisis. A foul wind that even the king of all-Hades couldn't stomach rose up from the deepest depths of that horrible chamber, enough to make anyone or anything with consciousness nauseous. It was a uniquely evil wind, rippling the blue flames cradled in their brass casings.

The cold, blue flames enhanced the gaunt bleached face of the most solitary prisoner in all of his realms. A look became manifest in Lucifer's rotten eyes, brimming with malice and an ancient, forbidden hatred; a hatred unlike anything matched by the likes of man, if not any other being at all. *"Aye..."* the rotten king muttered in his serpent's tongue, his gaze plotting and deep. The 'Loona' question was a question demanding to be answered; *"Something must be done..."*

Chapter End Notes

Hello, this is the author!

If you've made it this far, that means you have reached around past the halfway mark of this part of the Stranded Hound Series. Thank you so much for your support!

I've created a discord server for the purpose of posting stuff on there relating to this fanfic series as a whole. If you're interested, definitely do join!

Server link: https://discord.gg/UPYfEJGb

Babysitting For Dummies (Pt. I)

—=FRIDAY=—

The day of reckoning had finally come.

The first thing Loona did when she woke up in her bed was stare hopelessly up at the ceiling, the only thing staring back being the wood and brass ”windmill” ceiling fan. Through the crack in the drawn curtains shining to Loona’s right told her, very emphatically, that the grandest test of them all for her had come. Her task was simple — Babysit.

“…Oooouuuurrrgghh, fuuuuuuuccccckkk…” — This was the mournful groan that tumbled out from Loona like a death rattle. It might as well have been, the sense of terrible suspense she felt being enough to surely kill her. If the feeling Loona felt throughout her body was a poison injected into her, she would very well be gone already, perhaps by mere seconds of it being introduced.

A sound emanated, just outside the window where the veranda was; it was that same blasted mourning dove, cooing to her like it was nobody’s business. It welcomed Loona to the morning, right on time.

“Fuck, OOOFFFFFF,” Loona screamed at the veiled window, pelting one of her Converse shoes right into it — luckily it didn’t break.

Arising up from her pillow went Loona’s head, along with the rest of her body as she sat upright, like a living corpse arising from its tomb. The silver, dark gray and white mess that was the gothic hound’s bed head and fur certainly fit the whole ‘undead’ aesthetic, along with the disoriented look on her face. Alas, the “zombie” had awakened.

The inner workings of Loona’s brain apart from her mouth and reflexes took a whole minute to get going, a monumental task for sure — but none would be so monumental as the day ahead. Even getting up and throwing on her clothes was a chore, the simple task of throwing on her strapless bra followed by her crop top found to be more difficult than reasonable. The next feat soon would be combing her hair and fur. Soon Loona succeeded in dressing herself, her shorts the final things to be thrown on before she set outside.

The hike from bedroom to kitchen was easy enough, Loona being incentivized by the promise of coffee to rid of the morning fatigue. It was the one thing she had to look forward to that day, other than hoping the whole job would be canceled, the chances of that painfully slim. Coffee arrived by Loona's own hand in short time, the concoction of milk, sugar, and caffeine gracing her tongue and nostrils in all of its nourishing glory. A better start to the morning to be sure, a sort of comforting prelude for whatever would turn out to be.

Footsteps came just outside Loona's peripheral, and from them was a freshly-awoken Mister Steele. "You alright," he asked as his morning greeting, the question more direct and genuine than the usual, casual form of it.

Loona twisted her head around like a stiff ball joint, gawking at Jim with a weary look and forcing a broken smile; "J-Just peachy," she forced herself to groan, her true feelings plain to see.

Jim didn't need to press any further to know, and he came over to rest back first against the kitchen counter, beside Loona who was rummaging for something in the fridge. Her hands, slightly jittery and uncoordinated, clumsily searched around and just about knocked everything over on the main shelves, prompting a few of Loona's usual choice of curses.

"What are ya looking for," Jim asked curiously, peering into the fridge himself from where he stood.

"Something to eat," Loona said bluntly, still hunched over in the inner recesses of said fridge, tail swishing aimlessly from side to side; "Where the fuck's that— Where's that beef shit you had yesterday? It was right here, I left it right here!"

"It's in front of ya face," Jim pointed out with a smirk, gesturing to one of the lower shelves.

Loona paused and looked down, finding the half-opened packet of sliced silverside beef, the plastic peel-back top curled back. "Oh, right," the hellhound said quietly, her ears folding down with mild embarrassment.

With her fur-covered fingers Loona peeled out two slices from the ten pack, almost salivating greedily at the sight of them. Her jaws made a "pop" sound from the force of her bite, table manners a foreign thing to Loona in that moment as she scarfed the thick slices down.

“Ough… Mph, holy shit,” Loona groaned with her mouth full of food, the sensation of beef enough to calm her down from her case of jitters. A little ounce of gluttony had revealed itself in Loona’s hunger for food.

“Got some more info on the kid for ya,” Jim started while starting to make his own ‘morning juice’, intending to give the hound a heads-up for her big day.

But before he could continue, Loona shot up a hand that told him to be quiet. “Mm-mm. Noht yeht, eating,” she said in between chews, opening the fridge again to grab not two, but four extra slices of silverside beef — six remained. Loona scarfed this next round down too, barely a second after swallowing her last makeshift breakfast with gusto.

The feasting hound heartily swallowed the last of her morning snack, thumping her chest twice to help it all go down. Washing the taste of cold beef from her mouth with warm coffee, Loona then belted out; “Alright hit me, about the kid. What’s there to know?”

“Ah, it’s not much,” Jim admitted, sipping his own mug while leaning against the kitchen counter; “Her name’s Maya, she’s the daughter of my boss’ sister. She’s quiet apparently, so there’s that for ya.”

“Oh, thank fuck for that,” Loona sighed in relief, and for the first time she felt slightly hopeful about the whole thing.

“She’s got a routine though,” Jim added; “Her mum’ll tell ya when you get there.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Loona replied with a hand wave, wholeheartedly expecting it; “Same-old sorta routine, I get it. Breakfast, brush your teeth, get dressed, blah blah blah.”

“Well shit, there’s your confidence,” Jim remarked.

Loona hesitated after finally closing the fridge; “Uh.. Didn’t say I was confident, just that I know the basics. It ain’t rocket science.”

Jim paused at this just before he could take another sip. He looked to the hellhound with a faint, lips apart smile; “Well there ya go.”

“What,” Loona flatly said, giving the human an out-of-the-loop look.

“It’s not rocket science,” Jim casually elaborated, again trying to help his roommate’s aforementioned confidence; “It’s a kid, yanno? They’re not hard to deal with really, ya just gotta know what to do. Sounds like ya do, what you just told me.”

The words offered to Loona took a few seconds to fully process inside her still half-asleep head, but when they did she found that “confidence” she had been told she had. It wasn’t a lot of confidence, no, but it was a form of confidence nonetheless. But if not confidence, it was for sure the feeling of knowing something; maybe from that ‘something’ could confidence finally be found.

But doubt still reigned supreme within Loona’s inner machinations, and Jim could tell as much. That’s when he made the move of the day; “Hey, listen.”

Loona looked up from her coffee mug; “Yeah? What’s-…” The hellhound paused when she saw that her de-facto “roommate” stood there with his arms stretched out. She let out a sigh; “Dude, I’m not hugging you again, yesterday was a one-off thing!”

“C’mon, you know ya need it,” Jim nudged without relent, a knowing smirk appearing across his freshly-shaved face.

Still Loona hesitated greatly, refusal still running rife inside her head. But that didn’t last long. It was a momentous decision to make, but finally with a wince and a shuffle towards the human, the hellhound finally gave in — turns out she did need it.

“Thanks,” Loona said softly, wrapping her own arms around the man equal to her six-foot height. Again Loona felt that fuzzy feeling from days ago as she sunk into the embrace, locked into a hug that was now too late to refuse. She softly whispered; “I’m fucking nervous, dude, this is nerve-racking.”

“I know it is, I don’t blame you,” Jim said quietly, holding Loona in that snug embrace of theirs; “You’ll do good today. I’ve got your back, don’t worry. Always will.”

A comforted smile appeared on Loona's maw.

"Right, this is it," Jim announced as he pulled the classic pickup to a stop, idling in front of a brick house at the furthest end of the street.

Loona looked up from her phone towards the house to her left, having the closest view of it. The house wasn't anything special, if anything it was the most ordinary thing in existence; just a single-storey red brick house with a brown-tiled roof and a built-in garage. The only thing "spectacular" about it was the large bay window to the rightmost face of the house, presumably leading into a living room — it looked like it, as far as the now disguised hound could tell.

Crunch time was now upon Loona, with the analogue clock built into the dashboard of Jim's ute reading "12:58." The littlest hand counting the seconds taunted her, ticking relentlessly second by second.

"So yeah, as I said," Jim said; "If ya got any questions or if ya need help at any time, give me a ring. I'll help you as best I can."

"Mhm, okay," Loona mumbled, only half paying attention. She was too busy gawking at the house with an apprehensive look, a sort of tightening "fear" rising up in her chest — was it really going to not be rocket science, or was that wishful thinking?

Of course Jim noticed this, especially her exceedingly stiff posture; "You sure you're okay," he asked gently.

"Wh— huh? Ye-Yeah, just lemme… uff-, lemme think," Loona stammered nervously, playing with her hands a little bit in an apprehensive fidget.

"I'll come introduce ya if you want me to," Jim offered.

“I’m a grown woman, dude, I can do this. Just gimme a minute! Literally just a… just a minute. Tell me when it’s right on one, okay?”

The quiet little “okay” Jim gave in return was Loona’s cue to start thinking. The newly-minted gothic babysitter only had sixty seconds to think whatever she needed to think.

Loona pulled down the sun visor just above her head and looked at herself in the mirror. She found a pale-skinned young woman with long, fluffy silver hair staring back at her, her vibrant and unusual red eyes filled with thinly-contained nervousness. In addition to her crop top and shorts, she had thrown on the black jacket from the day before, having just ironed it that morning to make herself that bit more presentable. Loona knew full well she was nobody’s first choice for a babysitter, but she tried to look the part regardless — within her own style of course.

Touching up her black lipstick that bit more, Loona ran through in her head what her “angle of attack” would be. Her persona for the day would be straightforward; a simple, run-of-the-mill, alternative-looking young woman just out there looking for work, who was “great with kids.” That last part nearly made Loona snort, only to remember that this cover story would be her one and only chance to earn her some form of income, no matter how menial or insufficient. Money was money, and she needed it badly.

Pulling up the sun visor after her light makeup job, Loona fixed up her hair with her fingers and closed her eyes. The disguised hound began running through all the scenarios in her head, every challenge that she might face when babysitting an eight-year-old. Tantrums, creating messes, refusing to do what she said, the list went on. It took all of Loona’s strength to promise herself that under no circumstance would she ever lose her cool — she remembered her incident with that imp child those years ago. Though it pained her to remember, to visualize it once again, Loona assured herself she needed to remember; it was for her own good. Whatever would happen in the next twenty-four hours would surely be monumental—

“It’s one, Loona.”

Loona shot her eyes open and peered at the driver; “It’s… A-Already?”

Jim nodded and pointed to the clock on his dashboard; it was indeed right on one — “1:00.” It was crunch time.

Cautiously and wide-eyed Loona turned back to look at the house. She breathed in, slow and methodical, before letting it out in one equally slow exhale — she was ready.

"Call me if ya need, alright," Jim called out as Loona got out of the pickup.

Loona, fixing up her jacket, twisted around and nodded; "I will," she said as calmly as she could before shutting the door. She checked she had everything — phone, wallet, cigarettes — before finally making her way up the short path to the front door. There was no turning back now.

The babysitter was right up at the door before she even knew it. She stood awkwardly on the minuscule porch for a second, looking around with arms stiff by her side. Then at last, holding her breath, Loona finally made herself known, pressing the little white doorbell screwed into the brickwork.

At first there was no sound from inside, barely even a knock or anything to suggest anyone was home. The 'wanting to go home' part of Loona suggested that maybe there wasn't anyone home, but she shook this off by the incentive of money. Loona was just about to give the doorbell another go, when the sound of the door unlocking made her tense up.

Finally the white front door opened, and on the other side standing in the foyer was a woman in a dark blue business jacket, her brunette hair tied back in a bun. The plain look on her makeup-plastered face turned into a confused squint when she noticed the alternative woman standing before her. She opened her mouth to speak; "Can I help you?"

"Yeah, h-hi," Loona stammered to life, remembering her impromptu lines; "I, ah, uhm… I'm the, uh, the babysitter? For your kid, Maya?"

At first the brunette woman looked like she didn't know what the so-called 'babysitter' was talking about, her squint frozen on her face. It was only after she blinked when she realized; "…Ohh, you're the babysitter??"

"Ye-Yeah, that's me. The babysitter, hah," Loona repeated, forcing herself to smile — she was already off to a 'great' start.

“Ohh, okay-okay! Sorry-Sorry, I thought I was expecting… nevermind, sorry, I’m just really stressed right now!”

“Tell me about it,” Loona managed to slip in from under her breath.

The business woman shuffled back into the house on her high heels, allowing Loona to come inside; “Please, come in! Come in,” she frantically beckoned, definitely seeming stressed as she first claimed.

After giving Jim one final look back who was still waiting for her to go inside, Loona made her way into the house, closing the door behind her. Her eyes quickly adjusted to the change in lighting from outside to inside, finding a house which looked pretty clean for one that an eight-year-old lived in. Plain white walls decorated with one or two of the blandest modern paintings in existence decorated either side of the short foyer, an even blander white light illuminating overhead.

“Look thank you so, so much for coming, luv,” the brunette woman wholeheartedly expressed; “Didn’t think I’d be able to find anyone so soon! Really glad that my brother knows you somehow, it’s great!”

“Don’t mention it, it’s fine,” Loona said less enthusiastically, but trying to keep her persona of feigned smiles and politeness; “So uh, where’s this kid of yours? Is she around here?”

“She is! She’s in her room, just down here,” the woman said, still leading the way; “I’m Chloe by the way, nice to meet you!”

“Loona,” the disguised hound calmly revealed her name, still familiarizing herself with the house around her — just the foyer at least.

“Loona! Well shoot, can’t say I’ve ever heard a name like that before,” ‘Chloe’ kindly remarked as she finally reached the end of the foyer, leading into another hallway that ran horizontally relative to said entranceway.

In this new hallway were three doors all on the same side, leading into rooms that occupied the entire back half of the thus-far very bland house. Chloe gave a rundown of each; “So that one to the far left is my room, the one in the middle there is the bathroom, and that one down to the far right

there is Maya's room. She should still be in there, haven't seen her come out all day, asides from lunchtime!"

"Huh," Loona quipped, raising her brow; "Does she… usually stay in there, oor… what does she do?"

Strangely Chloe shook her head and let out a sharp sigh; it sounded oddly lost like she didn't know the answer. The mother of one went on; "Agh- Look, Maya's a little wonder. Sometimes she wants to be out all day, the next she's quiet as a mouse! And I'll be honest too with you, she doesn't actually speak often. I mean she will, she's not mute! But it's usually just short sentences and whatnot. She's a great kid, but you know, hah, sometimes you just wonder."

Loona tried her hardest to make head-or-tails of the strange miniature rant, trying to figure out whether this 'Chloe' was trying to give her advice on 'Maya', or if she was venting her own reservations. Nevertheless it was a strange sort of thing to say about a child, let alone one of your own to a complete stranger — even Loona knew this.

After much talking and slow pacing, Chloe led Loona right to the far right end of the hallway, stopping right outside what was apparently Maya's room. There wasn't any outward indication that this was a little girl's room, the white paneled door just as plain as the rest of the suburban home's interior. Loona began to wonder how anyone could live so cleanly and plain like this, the house tour thus far devoid of life.

Carefully Chloe wrapped her hand around the curved steel door handle and pushed down, then gently cracked the door open by a slither to peer inside. She apparently found her daughter, calling to her in the softest voice she could give; "Maya? Darling, your new babysitter's here. Can she come in to meet you?"

Meanwhile Loona shuffled closer to peer through the opening, trying to catch a glimpse of the kid whose health and safety she'd be in charge of. For the first time since entering into the house, Loona saw a room full of life, as was to be expected with something like someone's daughter's bedroom. While the walls were that same bland white as everywhere else so far, they defied the world of plainness with the sort of decorations one would expect from a little girl's room — wall-mounted butterflies, a few legos displayed on the dresser, a corner of the room dedicated to stuffed animals.

A wood-framed bed was pressed up to the furthest left corner of the room, and amongst the messed-up covers was this 'Maya' Loona had heard so much about. She was a small sort of thing,

probably barely any taller than the height of her dresser. Like her mother her hair was brunette, long but a little uncombed like she neglected her bed head. This ‘Maya’ was lying front-first on her bed, her small warm blue shirt and long gray pants covered partially by the blanket she had nestled herself in, and within her tiny hands was a massive drawing pad one-third her size.

The conventional normalcy wasn’t what surprised Loona, rather the sheer cleanliness of the bedroom. There wasn’t a single trace of mess to be found; on the floor, on the walls, anywhere. Apparently Maya took pride in her room.

Despite her mother’s soft calling, Maya kept on drawing like she hadn’t heard a thing — it was as though both mother and new babysitter were invisible to her. Either that, or she was deliberately ignoring them; whichever the case, Maya kept inattentive.

Loona stayed put at the door as her employer gently pushed the door open, revealing even more of the room as she approached her daughter. Crouching down to eye level with precision on her black high heels, Chloe softly placed a hand by Maya to get her attention; “Sweetie?”

At last Maya looked up from what she was doing, her big ocean-blue eyes fixated squarely on her mother, looking a little surprised.

“Your new babysitter’s here, sweetheart,” Chloe softly cooed, repeating her earlier offer; “Did you want to meet her?”

It took Maya a little bit to process the moment, acknowledging the elephant — more rather goth — in the room. Again her blue eyes shifted, this time to Loona who was standing awkwardly just outside.

Loona didn’t know what to do, merely staring back at the kid now making direct eye contact with her — red met with blue. “Hey there, uh.. kid,” the gothic babysitter introduced herself, trying to replicate Chloe’s softer tones with a half baked smile; “It’s-It’s nice to meet you?”

Maya didn’t say a word, and neither did she react in any meaningful way. Instead she just stared curiously, blinking a few times, as though Loona was the most mundane but interesting thing in the world all at the same time.

Left with nothing to work with, the disguised hound gestured to the drawing pad still in the little girl's hands; "What are you-… you drawing anything cool there? Anything… anything interesting?"

Again Maya's response was a blink, but she did finally make movement. Sliding off her bed and past her mother, Maya scooted up to Loona with the drawing pad and shyly showed off what had grabbed her attention so intensely. The 'what' of course turned out to be a drawing, resembling a flock of sheep — disproportionate sheep that is, of physiques that didn't bode well for their spinal columns and ability to walk had they existed. A massive tree of scribbled green and brown overshadowed the crudely drawn herd animals.

Cynicism almost escaped from Loona's lips, only to catch herself at the last minute; "Pfft, that sure is somethi— No wait, wooow!! That's great, kid! That's uh- this is great, great work! Great job!"

The praise however didn't have any great effect on Maya, who with a doughy-eyed blink turned around and went right back to bed. Thus far Loona didn't know what to make of this kid, strangely quiet behavior and all, faintly perking up a curious brow — Maya sure was a wonder.

Having hesitantly brushed off Loona's minor slip up, Chloe again in the most maternal way possible told Maya the status quo; "Mummy has to go now sweetie, okay? I won't be long." A brush of her daughter's hair with her purple false nails followed after.

Loona stood back as the mother trotted out the room; "Wait, you're going now? Wh-What about your daughter's routine and such, what do I do?"

"Oh! Yeah," Chloe exclaimed and snapped her fingers, the babysitter's reminder stopping her dead in her tracks; "Sorry-Sorry, just in a rush!" She waved for Loona to follow her, leading her into the living room that at least had a little more color by the way of paintings and an abstract, indiscernible-shaped sculpture. Chloe gave the babysitter a brief but thorough rundown; "Okay so! Maya's a very particular child, so she loves things in a very specific way. She wakes up dead-on seven in the morning, has breakfast dead-on an hour later, brushes her teeth and gets dressed a little later after that."

"Uhh-huh," Loona hummed, actually making a conscious effort to pay attention; "So what about the rest of the day?"

“Depends on her mood really,” Loona’s employer for the day said, collecting a brown briefcase that rested on the kitchen bench; “But she’s adamant at having lunch at twelve sharp. Anything you make she’ll eat, as long as it doesn’t have mushrooms, baked beans, or eggs — she absolutely HATES those.”

To this and more Loona nodded along throughout, starting to come to terms that perhaps this wasn’t going to be as complicated as before. Maybe, just maybe, within the benefit of the doubt, this job would be easier and far less stressful than Loona initially thought.

“Oh, also! Don’t forget her medication!”

“…I’m sorry, the what now?”

Trotting hastily over to the top cabinets of the designer kitchen, Maya’s mother opened one of the charcoal-black cupboards and pulled from it a little rectangular box. Printed on it was a label with many words and finer medicinal details, that of which Loona couldn’t even begin to fathom nor read.

“Give her some of these around her bedtime,” Chloe duly instructed, shoving the box into the babysitter’s briefly fumbling hands; “I give her just two a day, one in the morning and the other at night. She makes a bit of a fuss taking them, so wrap it up in some sort of chocolate or whatnot. I usually hide it in boysenberry yogurt, dilutes flawlessly in the stuff! There’s a fresh tub of it in the fridge.”

Loona looked down at the small flimsy box of medication, puzzled by the extra responsibility she now faced. “Alright,” she said, sounding unsure; “But wait hold up, what’s this for?”

“Apparently it helps with concentration. That's what the doctor said,” Chloe shrugged as she headed for the front door, the babysitter pursuing closely behind; “Personally I think it does jackshit, but hey, what do I know!” The business woman’s lavish nails scraped faintly against the white wooden door leading outside as her fingers wrapped around the handle; “But yeah! That’s all you need to know! Gotta go catch my flight now.”

“Your flight?? Wait, lady, hold up!”

Chloe however had already taken flight, rushing down the pathway towards the road; “Good luck!”

“Hey! Hey, wait a minute,” Loona shouted from the house, sounding desperate for the whole neighborhood to hear; “Where do I sleep! How much am I getting paid for this?!”

The gothic babysitter’s cries remain unanswered, watching as the business woman clambered into the back of a taxi, which then took off in a rush. All that Loona could do was purse her lips and sigh; the responsibility was now fully on her. Again she looked down at the box of medication, eyeing it with a furrowed brow; ‘what exactly did the kid need this for’ was the question which swirled inside Loona’s head. The disguised hound looked back up to the road, scanning the outer suburbia — Jim was definitely no longer there. The ball was firmly in Loona’s park.

Closing the door behind her, Loona tramped back to the living room, planting herself with a heavy “thump” down on the comfortable but firm sky-blue couch. Her head fell backwards, resting against the well-cushioned backrest, her wondersome gaze “focused” up at the plain white ceiling; how the hell was she going to do this?

To distract herself a little, Loona started to look around the living room she now found herself in. She marveled at the sheer amount of… nothing there was. It wasn’t like the room was empty per se, more rather that for a *living room,* it was one of the blandest things imaginable. The only real things that popped out to Loona was the color of the couch, the strange, tall, and abstract bauxite-red sculpture, and the paintings splattered with haphazard shapes and patterns. It looked more akin to some new-age artist’s private gallery than anything else, let alone a place where an eight-year-old would live.

Speaking of which…

Time to herself didn’t last long for Loona, for she heard the feeble sound of light footsteps come from the hallway behind. She froze then twisted herself around to find that Maya had emerged from her room. Replacing the drawing pad the so-far quiet child once had in her hands was a small white stuffed rabbit; it was soft-looking, covered in immaculate curly white fur, and a large silver silk bow tied around its neck, the knot sitting behind its simple round head. Its small, beady eyes gazed unfocused to the floor, as well as its head that flopped lifelessly to one side, resting against Maya’s forearm.

Loona looked to her responsibility for the day with widened eyes, words failing her for a second. Eventually however, the gothic babysitter found her voice; “Uhh… Hey there, kid,” she greeted unsurely, weakly raising a hand up as a wave.

But exactly as she had acted from within her bedroom, Maya said nothing, nor reacted in any significant way. Again she stared doughy-eyed, analyzing Loona with those near unreadable blue eyes. The child looked indifferent but curious all at the same time; the subject of said highly attentive stare couldn't quite put her finger on it.

The confusion and awkwardness that Loona felt began to turn into a bout of mild annoyance. She squinted at the kid, and asked almost impatiently; "Can you, like, blink or something? Say something, anything? Uhh… Ah shit— look, what do you want? Are you hungry, have you had lunch yet?"

As if it were a miracle, Maya finally did something different; she nodded her head slowly. It was a response, a mute and careful one at that, but one nevertheless.

Loona sighed, short and sharply; "That... That doesn't answer anything, I'm sorry. Which is it? Are you hungry?"

No reply.

Loona tried again, the second option this time; "So you've had lunch already, is that it?"

Maya nodded a second time.

The amateur babysitter raised her brow, feeling as though she had just cracked a code; she had started to figure the kid out. "Oookay, we're getting somewhere," she whispered to herself.

With fortunes in the art of looking after kids steering in Loona's favor, she pivoted herself around more to face the little Maya, sitting on one folded leg as support. The roles were reversed as Loona focused on the doughy-eyed kid, trying to figure out what exactly her deal was; why was she so quiet? Kids aren't usually this quiet, it was one of the main reasons why the hellhound turned de-facto daycare attendant was fretting so much about this job in the first place.

A tiny hand brushed the forearm of Loona's leather jacket, causing her to jolt; "Woah, what the-!"

Spinning back around, Loona found that the culprit, Maya, had stealthily come even closer, her small hand reeled back from her caretaker's startled reflex. The kid looked that bit more alert now that the elder in the room had acted in her way.

Loona expelled a sharp exhale; "Jeez kid, give me a heart attack why don't you!" Though Maya seemed mostly unphased, if not just a little startled, her caretaker felt more than obligated to maintain low tones. Calming herself, Loona pressed; "What was that for, what's going on?"

There came no reply.

Again came the need for guess work, so Loona shot at the wind; "The jacket, you like the jacket? Is that it?"

In a second miraculous turn of events, Maya responded again with a sheepish, quiet nod; her stuffed rabbit still firmly wrapped within her arms.

Carefully Loona thought about her next move, figuring that it was too late to just tell the kid to go away. "Listen, kid. Maya or whatever your name is," Loona began; "Rule number one in life. You don't, that is *never,* go up to people and poke them outta nowhere! Gotta ask first, yeah? Now if you wanted to try out my jacket because you like it so much, you could've just— aaand you're not understanding any of this, are you?"

Maya's response was nothing more than a blink, giving nothing for her caretaker to work with.

Loona tried her hardest to suppress a groan; this was going to be a long day.

Babysitting For Dummies (Pt. II)

Barely any time at all had passed, and still Loona was no closer to figuring out this ‘Maya’ and her patterns.

Having just planted herself back down on the couch after checking on the little hermit in her room, Loona paid a glance to the analogue clock adjacent to the bay window; ”five past three,” it read. Two hours. It had only been two hours, and already it felt like she had been there for a week. She dreaded how long it would’ve felt, come tomorrow. Still, Loona was thankful that Maya had been relatively easy to manage, even if she was unusually quiet for a child. All in all, despite her earlier deep-rooted reservations, the amateur babysitter felt cautiously optimistic; maybe she could get through this without a hitch, and with pay at that.

For the first time since she got there, or even since her banishment from hell, Loona fished out her phone from her jacket in the thin hope that it still worked. Miraculously it did, though access to the hellhound’s internet provider had been of course cut out, leaving it as nothing more than a digital photo album. Camera roll aside, nothing else worked; phone, social media, nor messaging. It was then Loona realized that Jim might’ve been out of reach because of this; if that was the case, then she really was alone in this. Unless there was a landline in this house, which to Loona’s naked eye from the couch seemed unlikely.

There came a dull “thump” from the direction of the hallway behind Loona, causing her to shoot upright to attention. Immediate stillness came right after.

“Kid? You okay in there,” Loona called out, not actually expecting a reply.

As expected, none came. But it came as no comfort to the babysitter; in fact, quite the opposite.

Fighting against her instinct to stay put, Loona got up from the couch and headed straight to the inner recesses of the house; “Hey, kid. M-Maya, what was that noise?”

Quick was the pace of Loona’s feet, and in no time at all she made it to her responsibility’s bedroom door, completely shut. She grabbed hold of the door handle and pulled down — it wouldn’t budge.

Alarm bells rang inside Loona's head. She knocked firmly on the door, a droplet of sweat already forming on her brow; "Kid? Kid! Please, come on, open the door! Maya!"

Right before Loona was about to consider busting the door down, the muffled metallic "clunk" of the door being unlocked was heard. The door crept open, revealing Maya on the other side, thankfully unharmed, looking up at her caretaker. She looked mildly confused, perhaps wondering what her babysitter's deal was.

A massive sigh of relief escaped Loona's agape mouth; "Okay, you're good! Good. Ugh, holy shit… Wuh-What was that noise, what did you do? What dropped in there?"

Though still as quiet as anything, Maya shook her head with that bit more clarity than before. She pointed back inside the room, jutting her finger out at something on the floor.

Loona looked up from the child and deeper into her room, finding a large wooden box roughly in the center. Judging from the scuff marks in the bedroom's carpeted floor, the box had been dragged some distance from where it had apparently fallen. Apparently Maya had the hidden strength to not only pull the box down from wherever it was, but to drag it to the middle of her room despite it being at least twice her size.

"A box," Loona uttered, staring at the plain wooden thing; "Okay, alright. Better than something being smashed… So what's in it, you gonna show me?"

Turns out Maya wanted to do just that, scurrying back to the plain wooden chest and with a bit of effort flipped open the lid. A glimmer of excitement flickered in Maya's blue eyes as she pointed to the contents inside, jumping up a little on her toes energetically.

Now Loona really didn't want to look, she couldn't be bothered as the urge to retreat back to the couch was so enticing. But at the end of the day, she was being paid an unnamed sum to look after this kid — might as well put in the effort now that she was effectively trapped here.

Suppressing the groan she felt so inclined to make, Loona set foot into the bedroom to check out what exactly was so exciting. Maya continued to point squarely at whatever was inside, in case the grown-up somehow missed it.

The things inside the crate weren't expected by Loona to be anything too out of the ordinary, and sure enough they weren't. What lay inside was an array of sparkly clothes, haphazardly stuffed inside from whenever they were last used. It wasn't a huge wardrobe of child-sized, cheap material dresses either; one was plain yellow, the other an in-between of purple and pink, and another was sky blue with decorative, shimmering silver sequences on its ruffled Juliette sleeves.

All in all Loona wasn't surprised, having expected something along the lines of this. "Right, so… What're you planning to do with this," she asked, trying to humor whatever Maya had in store.

Maya responded in kind in her little silent game of show but don't tell. Rummaging in the box, she hand-picked the yellow dress and unfurled it in all of its yellow-fabric glory. At first Loona thought that Maya was merely showing it off, but when she started nudging it towards her caretaker, the hound realized what exactly she wanted.

At first Loona assumed she was joking, her incredulous expression devoid of subtlety saying as much, but the expected punchline never came. "You want me to play dress-up with ya," Loona finally said, pausing with disbelief; "Uh, okay, um, how do I put this… This might come as a shock to you, but that's *way* too small for me," she broke the news, adding a little too much attitude than needed for talking to a child.

A wash of disheartened realization dimmed Maya's little round face, only to rebound with a gasp before she sped off out the bedroom.

Loona almost tripped when Maya carelessly skimmed past her. "Woah, hey! Where are you going now," she called out, trying to decipher Maya's motives. Quickly Loona slid out the room after the miniature speed demon, just in time to see Maya scurry away into her mother's bedroom, the door left wide open.

Hot on the little girl's trail like a hunting dog, Loona hurried to the master bedroom and peered inside, finding Maya right in the middle of rummaging through the wardrobes. A coat had already fallen to the ground off its coat hanger, disheveled into a magenta pile on the floor, but evidently this wasn't the clothing Maya sought after. As it turns out, what Maya sought after was something far more extravagant.

The babysitter stood back and watched as the eight-year-old's tiny hands grabbed hold of one particular long white dress, protected by a sheet of thick plastic. The dress plummeted to the carpeted floor on account of Maya's short stature despite her trying to raise it upright. With a

glimmer of excitement in her eyes full of childish wonder, she showed what was clearly a wedding dress to her new babysitter.

Loona gawked at the long flowing gown, admittedly finding it impressive. But regardless of her impression of the dress, she had to break the news; “Yeah okay, nice dress. But I really don’t think your mom would like me wearing her stuff,” Loona said, taking the dress out of the girl’s hands struggling to keep it up.

But Maya wasn’t yet done. With her tiny hands now free, she turned back around to again pillage her mother’s wardrobe.

Before she could lay a finger on another article, Loona finally intervened. “Okay, no,” she said flatly, wedging herself between the little mite and the wardrobe; “Let’s not pull out your mom’s clothes, okay? It’s not my stuff to wear, and it’s not yours to play around with. We’ll find something else to do, yeah?”

Again Maya gave Loona a look of being let down, the excitement sapped from her by the babysitter’s resistance. It then turned into pleading, a silent, begging-eyed stare.

Loona rolled her eyes; “Don’t give me that look, you little twerp, you know what I’m saying’s right! It’s not gonna work on me, I’m sorry.”

Folding her arms together, Loona ended the denial with a little pout, a subtle sign to the “little twerp” that the disguised hound’s resolve was unrelenting. She wouldn’t budge for as long as she lived — at least so she thought.

For as long as Loona stood there with arms folded, so too did Maya’s little pleading stare. It was a long stare, soft and delicate but somehow it had a sort of unsettling effect. It was like Loona was staring at an animal, small and brittle against herself, but its innocence could crack even the hardest of hearts.

And what an effect it had. The usually staunch goth with a heart of stone began to crack, feeling her conviction waver at the sight of those ridiculous blue eyes staring into her very being. Something in Loona’s stone heart began to shift like sand, and began to fall victim to Maya’s childlike pleading.

Loona's pout began to falter, little by little as the seconds ticked by, and with one final crack something momentous happened — she gave in.

"Ugh— Okay fine! I'll wear the stupid dress," Loona at last bemoaned to Maya's overwhelming delight. *"Can't believe I'm actually doing this, fuck me…"* she further muttered under her breath, making sure the eight-year-old wouldn't catch a case of sailor's mouth.

The newly-crowned Disney princess peeled the protective fabric away from the gown, and tossed it onto the queen-sized bed just behind her. Loona splayed it out for herself, holding it in both hands to inspect it all. Just by looks alone the gothic lady could tell this was no cheap hand-me-down. The fabric was soft, silky, and finely sewn in a supremely intricate fashion with only the finest, thinnest, but strongest thread. Close to the long, flowy base of the petticoat section was a flowery pattern, a continuous band wrapping around the entire lower circumference. Loona recognized the flower shape too — it was a white rose.

"Let's see that dress, shall we?" — The echoey, indistinct voice of Loona's smoky spectre friend rang out soft but prominently. It waited patiently outside the dressing room, standing in its waving, fickle, gray smoke-like form with calm, supernaturally passive demeanor.

"I really like this one," Loona squeaked as she came out from the dressing room of the officially shut clothing store. Nothing however would stop the hellhound from treating herself for the first time, even if it was ten at night.

Out came the hound from the change-room cubicle, now sporting the prettiest dress she had ever set eyes on. It was a long, slim-fitting formal maroon dress, going all the way down just above her ankles. What sold the dress for Loona was what decorated the lower circumference of the petticoat section — a long stretching band of sewn-in white roses, looped around the entire breadth.

The wispy gray figure, though without any distinct facial features, marveled at Loona as she revealed herself and performed a little twirl. ***"Stunning,"*** the spectre said full of kind-hearted conviction; ***"Like the most stunning thing in all of Hades."***

"Y-You really think so," Loona asked almost disbelievingly, brushing at her hair with embarrassment.

"Absolutely," the soft-speaking apparition beamed, outstretching its arms almost like it was expecting a hug; ***"It's like it was made for you."***

"Hah, I wish," Loona giggled with a light snort, looking down to check out the fit. She had really grown attached to it all, though it technically wasn't hers.

A massive part of her wanted to just run out with it, adding it to her limited wardrobe — the choice between her new red sweater and this gorgeous formal dress was all Loona could ever ask for, aside from a proper home.

"You know," Loona began to reflect, looking back up at her mysterious friend; "I really wished someone would gift this to me. Anyone. It-It makes me feel so special, so loved! I-I want it so bad!"

The spectre remained silent for a moment, looking at Loona with its featureless head. ***"Well, if you insist,"*** It began to speak; ***"Then I'd say consider it a gift, from me to you."***

Loona's eyes widened and she looked up; "W-What? But that would be stealing, they can't catch me stealing! They'll have me sent to actual prison if they—"

Suddenly the figure shot up its hand, and without warning it clicked its fingers, the short sharp noise echoing in the largely empty store.

Loona stood there, highly confused; "What did you… What was that for, what did you do?"

"Gave you a gift," the mysterious spectre said; ***"You wanted to feel loved, as you said. So what I've done is exchanged ownership of that dress over to you. The tailor won't even know it's gone, let alone that he was selling it in the first place."***

The tell-all stumped Loona who stood there frozen, trying to figure out in vain if it was joking or not. She huffed weakly, almost like a dry, disbelieving laugh; "Huff-.. What are you tryna say, you're a genie?"

"You could call me that," the wispy figure replied sincerely, taking the question as a serious one. There was no hint of humor in its mysterious, silky voice.

The orphan didn't know what to make of this answer. She was confused, happy, and grateful all at once. Loona smiled, again looking down at her new dress; "I… Why are you doing this, for me? I'm-I'm practically nothing, why are you—"

"Shh…" Before Loona could continue insulting herself, the gray spectre put a ghostly finger up to its face, around where lips would be; ***"It's what you deserve. Of all the people in all of Hades, you deserve this the most. It's what your mother would want."***

The mention of the orphan's mother set a sort of brief melancholy in motion amidst the joy she had felt. "I wish I knew my mom," Loona confessed after a bout of silence, swallowing the sudden lump in her throat. The gorgeousness of the dress she wore distracted her from anguish.

The figure, standing as Loona's only friend, didn't reply.

By the time Loona came back to reality, she was hearing the almost unthinkable; the sound of Maya's timid pipsqueak voice calling out to her. The disguised hound blinked and looked down at the child, now tugging at her arm.

"Hey," Maya squeaked periodically, having found her voice, a look of confusion about her face; "Hey?"

That's when Loona realized her jaw had been left agape throughout her daydream, the dryness of her mouth saying as much. "Hey. Hey, sorry," Loona finally piped up, bringing moisture back to her throat with a cough; "Sorry, I just… nevermind, I'm being dumb. Lemme go put this thing on for you, okay? Wait here."

Without looking back to make sure Maya stayed put, Loona hurried off to the bathroom to change, the dress wrapped neatly around the crook of her arm. Locking the bathroom door behind her, she got to undressing which was easy enough, tossing the crop top, shorts, and jacket onto the side of the bathtub.

Now came the hard part; slipping into this beautiful monument to tailoring. Loona was careful to slip the entire silky, fluffy thing over her head, squeezing herself into it from the bottom up. To her surprise it slipped onto her entire slender frame quite well, stopping just as her head peeked out through the top-end. Sliding her arms through the ruffled arm holes with cautious effort, Loona

finally managed to fully slip into the entire dress — her transformation was complete, graduating from moody gothic young woman, to Disney Princess.

Loona tried her hardest not to feel embarrassed when she noticed herself in the mirror. She looked stupid, so she thought Everything about this expensive wedding dress clashed with Loona's appearance, from her black lipstick to her black-and-white converse shoes, even her long, flowing, silver mane of hair. If anything, she looked like she was about to film a punk-alternative music video from the early two-thousands — now that Loona wouldn't mind, if only it was the case.

Now well and truly out of her element, Loona sucked it up and left the bathroom, advancing once again back to the mother's bedroom. She found Maya who surprisingly had stayed put; turns out she was a great listener.

"There, here you go," Loona announced as she stepped into the bedroom, revealing herself with arms stretched out; "Bet you're happy now."

Maya wasn't just happy, she was ecstatic. Widened blue eyes gawked in awe at the "Princess" now standing before her, gleaming in white like polished quartz. For this child full of wonder, it must've been like a Queen had just stepped into the room.

The babysitter scoffed at the reaction, and smirked; "You are one weird child," Loona said, rolling her eyes — but inside she was glad her babysitting stint was going somewhat right. "So here we go, got the damn dress on. What are we doing here," the "humiliated" woman further asked.

A light bulb went off in the child's head and she promptly grabbed the babysitter's hand without warning, then without pause led her out the room.

Loona lurched forward as she was towed out; "Woah hey, easy!"

But Maya had no time for going easy. She was on a mission, and she was going to pursue it as quickly as she liked, Loona's balance be damned.

Hauled around all hunched over was Loona as she stumbled into the kitchen, Maya's grip remarkably tight around her pale hand. The child's grip only relented when she let go and rushed up to the pantry and pointed excitedly up at the tall cabinet doors.

Finally allowed to stand upright, Loona glanced over at the cabinet and squinted; “Okay so what now, you want me to open it?”

Maya nodded enthusiastically, her head bobbing so violently that it could snap off at any moment.

Loona obliged by opening the tall doors, and before she knew it Maya had pushed right in front of her to peer inside. From the looks of things by her hands grabbing at the wind, the little busybody was after something on the higher shelves, obviously too far for her small arms to reach.

Effectively being Maya’s servant, Loona searched for whatever her “master” was after, hovering her hand over each thing and checking for Maya’s reaction. Soon as the gothic babysitter’s hand hovered over the box of teabags, the little girl went ballistic, nodding her head with the biggest smile on her face.

“Riiight, a tea party. Makes sense,” Loona muttered and plucked the whole box from the shelf. Though unsure of where this was going, she tossed the box of teabags onto the kitchen counter, noticing as Maya pulled up a stool for herself to reach properly.

Trying to engage in Maya’s somewhat clearer plan, Loona tutored out of obligation; “You do know that tea’s hot, right? As in boiling hot, that’s how you make it. Ya boil it, pour it into a mug, and boom! You got tea. Unless you want to make iced tea, then—”

Loona stopped speaking when Maya nodded her head clearly; iced tea was the goal.

“Iced tea now, gotcha,” Loona corrected; “But you still gotta boil water for that. I’ll do that for ya, so we don’t end up in tears. Last thing we want is burning flesh.”

Utilising her sharp black nails as a knife of sorts, Loona slit the box open and pulled out a ‘Tetley’ tea bag for either of them. The smell of grounded tea leaves was potent from the small white bags and lingered in the air, and this was before the actual brewing process had even begun. Keeping the wedding dress she was forced to wear spotless was one task for Loona, but trying to keep the potent smell of tea leaves out of it was another can of worms. *“Anything for the brat,”* the totally regular, totally human young adult thought to herself, sighing as she put the kettle on.

Turns out Maya was a great little help too, as before Loona had even asked, she now had a whole tin of sugar and a tray of ice cubes at her disposal. Loona raised her brow; “Oh shit, thanks,” she thanked, again letting that sailor mouth slip — not that she really cared.

“Alright, water’s boiled,” Loona half muttered to herself and Maya, hoping her pint-sized dictator was watching for learning purposes; “All I need is two glasses for both of us, if you could— wh— hey!”

Like a bottle rocket Maya shot off, scampering out of the kitchen and back towards her bedroom, long brunette hair trailing behind like a cape. She had just ditched her babysitter, apparently scurrying away for something far more interesting.

“Oh sure, just leave me here to do it on my own! That’s very helpful Maya, very helpful,” Loona called out, watching helplessly from her post as the kid vanished back down the hallway. She shook her head disapprovingly and continued making the iced tea, retrieving the glasses which Maya was meant to help with getting; they were tall glasses with diamond-patterned bases, something pretty to look at.

Just as Loona thought she was going to be alone for the remainder of the preparation process, Maya ran back into view, her footsteps pitter-pattering against the polished wooden floorboards. There was something new in Maya’s tiny hands, the thing that must’ve crossed her busy mind; a silver tiara.

The return of “the brat” came as a relief to Loona, though she didn’t show it outwardly. “Took you long enough,” the part-time chef piped up, having just hung the teabags in their respective glasses. She glanced at the tiara, and knowing exactly what Maya was expecting of her, begrudgingly plucking it out of the little girl’s hands and perched it atop her head. “Really dressing me up now, arentcha,” Loona sighed.

Maya’s reaction was filled with glee, a cheek-wrinkling cheeky grin washing her face in a ray of contagious sunshine. That earlier shyness, that sheepishness that had initially held the eight-year-old back from properly meeting her new babysitter for the first time, had seemingly faded away. She was still largely quiet, sure, but she certainly wasn’t not full of beans.

Loona looked to the child with a stone-faced expression, seeing just how purely, unshakably happy she was. Loona of course was no natural when it came to kids, but something about how this particular girl, full of wonder and childhood innocence, seemed so happy made something dawn on the disguised hellhound; she was happy because of her. In spite of everything — her nature, who

she really was, what she had done in her past, and all of her callousness — Loona had managed, so far, to pull the whole babysitting thing off. And in such a short time, too. Sure she wasn't done just yet, but it was a start.

Loona began to smile; maybe this wouldn't be so difficult after all. The closed fist was unravelling into an open palm.

Two hours passed. The afternoon had begun to turn into dusk as the clock struck thirty past five, and the temperatures of the moderate day had begun to grow colder. The night, slowly but surely, chipped away at the last of the daylight.

Amidst the torturously stale and sterile interior was Loona, with wedding dress and tiara still on, according to little Maya's liking. It had remained clean and odorless for the duration Loona had worn it thus far; so far, so good. The pangs of explosive energy Maya had were now spent, and now full of iced tea and a few snacks she nicked for herself, sat squarely on the couch watching cartoons for the remainder of the afternoon. This left Loona alone for some downtime, a breather in other words.

Loona breathed a deep sigh of relief as she retreated to the backyard, slouching back-first onto the screen door as she looked up into the darkening sky. The babysitter had just finished clearing up a board game she had tried out with Maya, helping her learn the ins-and-outs of how to play Monopoly, with varying success. The orange hues of the westerly setting sun cast a beautiful light show on the clouds above, leaving the disguised hound to marvel at it for a little bit.

As Loona did so, she almost mindlessly fished the phone from out her chest. She wanted to check something, in the vain hope that some form of connection would grace her now largely useless phone. The surprise Loona felt when she noticed a singular bar of mobile data on the top-right of the screen was monumental. It was only a fickle connection, but a connection nonetheless. Filled with hope that she could speak with the outside world, Loona hastily unlocked her phone, ceasing the opportunity to make a call.

"Come on, please work," Loona bargained in a harsh breath, fingers sporadically navigating the screen as a sweat trickled down her temple; "Come on, ya piece of shit, come on!" Dialing a certain number and punching the 'call' button proved miraculously successful to Loona's relief; "YES!"

Adrenaline shakes affected Loona's usually steady hand as she raised the phone to her ear, listening with choking anticipation to the dull electrical ring. Two rounds of buzzing later, and the rings abruptly stopped. They were replaced with muffled rustling sounds, followed closely by a voice; *"Ey, Loona!"*

"Jim! Yeah, it's me, hey," Loona sighed again with blissful relief, balling her left hand on her hip; "Hah, finally got this damn phone to connect. Thought it never would!"

"Well shit, glad it did! Sorta worried about that myself. So how's it goin' over there, you alright with Maya?"

"Ah…" Loona took a moment to evaluate how she was doing with her babysitting stint so far. She thought about it for a short while, then reported; "S-Surprisingly, yeah! She's not too bad actually, far from the… far from the bratty, little asshat that I expected. I dunno, I just expected way worse! Way different!"

A humorous wheeze buzzed through the speaker; *"Oh yeah right, as if I'd put ya with one of them!"*

Just like that Loona bursted into a fit of laughter; "I'm glad you didn't! Ahh fuck, if you did, we'd have a bloodbath over here! Ohh shit-balls, what the hell… Hey, listen. Thanks for believing in me, about doing this thing. Didn't actually think I'd be able to, but hey, here I am! Managing!"

"Well go on then, what's ya secret?"

"Huh what, what secret," Loona asked, genuinely confused.

"About the kid! Looking after her," Jim persisted; *"What's the secret?"*

Loona was left utterly stumped by the question, not because it was a difficult question, but rather that there was no complex answer to give. She said as much; "There's… there's no secret? She's a kid. You know what it's like, you entertain whatever the hell she wants to do and whatnot, and boom. You got a happy kid."

"Well look at that! You got it figured out it sounds like," said Jim with much congratulations, his previous question now evidently only a trick one. He cleared his throat into his microphone and added; *"No, but seriously, good on ya for pulling through with this. It really sounds like you're doing well."*

Loona sputtered, that smile of hers growing wider and toothier; "Hah, right? I'm-I'm surprised myself, like damn! I'm actually… I'm actually doing this."

There wasn't anything to add to this, the over the phone catch-up slogging to a halt and devolved in both human and undercover hellhound half-laughing to each other, followed by small-talked 'yeahs'. Loona went silent for a minute and watched the westerly horizon, the late afternoon hue giving her a sight to behold as she thought about something — a question. It wasn't a question that Loona would usually ask, such as an inquiry or a thinly-veiled witty remark, rather it was something more… serious. Not anything bad, but rather a question she felt needed to be asked. Accompanying this question was a light flutter in the gothic woman's chest.

"Say, Jim," Loona found herself saying, the words tumbling out like pebbles; "If I asked a strange question, would you care?"

"Nothing stranger than a hellhound living with me, mate, I'm used to strange shit," Jim quipped humorously. Though Loona couldn't see his face, she knew that the Australian was grinning from ear to ear; he was right, there wasn't anything stranger than their joint living situation. Jim continued; *"Whadya wanna ask?"*

Just as Loona's mouth flapped open, the words died just like that on her breath. The question still lingered, along with the fluttering feeling, but the hellhound felt that now wasn't really the time to ask it. Not that she didn't want to ask it, but more because she felt uneasy to let it out — that is, just yet.

"Nothing, don't worry about it," Loona dismissed herself, looking away from the sunset she found herself drifting at; "I'll tell you later, maybe, it's nothing serious. I gotta get back to Maya."

"Ah, that's alright," Jim said with an up-beat sing-song tone; *"But yeah! Again if ya need anything, gimme a call. Gonna pull a late-nighter anyhow!"*

"Mm-hm. Don't worry, I will," Loona nodded along thoughtfully, the unspoken question she felt inclined to ask hanging over her head. "Anyway, well… I'll see you later dude. Got this kid to look

out for."

"All good! See ya, Loons."

"See you. … Wait, what did you just call me?"

But when Loona waited briefly for an answer, all that she got back was silence; Jim had already hung up, seeming that his out of the ordinary roommate had taken too long to add her question. In truth, Loona knew exactly what Jim had called her, though was conflicted on her opinion of the sudden nickname.

She leant her head back against the door, and looked up into the darkening sky. Cloud-spotted blue had turned into orange then purple, and now was becoming that cosmic blackness. A few stars were beginning to appear here and there, dotted ever-so conservatively across the sky. Loona exhaled slowly through her nose, eyes locked upwards once again, as she thought; *"How am I going to say it?"*

Giving it no further thought, and focusing on the nagging task at hand, Loona went back inside.

Babysitting For Dummies (Pt. III)

Maya hadn't moved an inch when Loona returned to check up on her. The television still rambled whatever nonsense it was playing, but as for its lone four-foot viewer, she had well and truly drifted off to dreamland. Apparently the past nigh on five hours was enough excitement to warrant some shuteye.

Loona snickered under her breath at the sight, finding it hilarious just how quickly the miniature boss had conked out. It had barely been two hours ago when the same girl had been towing the goth around like she was nothing, demanding that she do this and that for her, in accordance to exactly how she saw fit. To see the little terror snoring away like this was almost unnatural.

Unnatural or not, in all honesty with herself, Loona was glad for it. She tiptoed her way around the couch, careful not to wake her employer's daughter in case she had even more in store; the wedding dress she lugged about in was more than enough. Two glasses which smelled faintly of cold tea lay on the coffee table, both of which Loona quietly collected and returned them to the kitchen; she'd wash them up later, maybe. After she sat down for a bit. Yeah, then, and no later — for sure.

Cautiously Loona hauled herself back to the couch and eased herself into the cushioning, lifting up the bottom of the gown in case any pressure ended up tearing the silky fabric. She tilted her head to look at Maya, making sure she hadn't awoken by the couch shifting — she hadn't, thankfully. This gave Loona ample opportunity to be "alone," but simultaneously keeping a weather eye out for the sleeping kid in case something happens, somehow. If there was one thing this hound knew about kids, from what little she did know, it's that anything can happen to them, and for any reason. And so she kept guard.

Kicking her shoes off, they tumbled to the ground after four hours of chasing Maya around, giving Loona that extra comfort to kick back with. She stretched her legs out straight, letting her arms fall lazily to her side, and turned her attention back to the still blaring television; cartoons played obnoxiously from the thin black rectangle of brain-melt. Loona scoffed at it with a lurch and reached for the remote, thus shutting off the annoying bright-colored display which she thought was beyond her advanced maturity. And then there was silence, allowing Loona to at last relax. With one more glance at Maya for good measure, the babysitter tilted her head back, and closed her eyes for a bit.

A softer, more relaxed type of sound shook her gently from her momentary rest. She didn't recognize what it was at first as she had almost fallen asleep, but soon Loona realized through the bout of brain fog that it was coming from the TV. Already her eyes felt heavy, but without too much effort she pried them open, and peeked through leaden eyelids at what she expected to be a blank screen.

It wasn't blank. No, it wasn't, as a wildly different scene now played on the television. A black-and-white live action film now occupied where bright colors and cartoon characters once stirred only a few short minutes ago. It was a scene featuring two serious-faced men — one younger with moderate facial hair, the other far older and long-bearded — standing together on the banks of a narrow river, circling each other in the midst of intense conversation. A cuckoo bird sung softly in the background, somewhere amidst the life-rich trees that populated the grassy terrain. The winding narrow river they stood beside trickled softly.

"How can you paint being in this frame of mind," the younger man questioned, the English subtitles at the bottom of the screen providing translation for the language he spoke in; *"And you accept praises. I'd have taken the vows of schema and lived in a cave."*

"I serve God, not men," the old man rebuked, looking off into the distance for a moment in time, then back at the circling young man. He spoke affirmatively to him, locking eyes; *"They praise you today, then vilify you tomorrow. The next day they'll forget why they praised you. They'll forget you and me — everything. Everything is vanity and decay."*

Loona was left stumped by what she was seeing. Amidst the obvious question of *'how did it turn back on'* and *'how did the channel change'*, the other far more nagging question was *'what am I watching'*. Something began to burn inside her, something growing and odd in feeling. This feeling was the same as what she had felt before; way before. But now it felt like a message.

The scene went on unhindered. It was the bearded old man's turn to circle pensively, the camera following his every slow movement; *"All follies and vile deeds were committed in the past, and men are only repeating them now. Everything is an eternal circle, and it repeats and repeats itself. If Jesus returned, they'd crucify him again."*

Gazing out with his back against the man several years his senior, the younger man argued; *"If you only remember evil things… you will never be happy before God."*

This snatched the older man's attention, snapping his head back towards his refuter; *"What?"*

"Maybe you should forget some things, not all," the arguer elaborated with hesitation at first thought, evidently trying to excuse his comment without further confrontation; *"I... I don't know how to say it."*

The old man gave stern advice to this, his stare unwavering but full of compassion; *"Don't say it then, listen to me."*

Pivoting his gaze, the junior of the two again made eye contact with the senior; *"Do you think you can do good single-handed,"* he asked, effectively staring the old man down.

"Do good? Do good?! Do you remember the New Testament? Jesus collected men in temples and taught them!" — As the elderly man shouted, the younger listener began wandering off in conflicted thinking, taking in every word as it was delivered with assertion. — *"Later they came to kill him! "Crucify him! Crucify him," they cried! And his disciples? Judas betrayed him, Peter denied knowing him! They all fled, and they were the best of the best!"*

"But they repented," the young man called back to point out, halting in his tracks with his back facing the one-woman audience.

"Yes," the old man said forcefully from outside the frame; *"When it was too late!"*

The television went blank.

It shut off just like that, like nothing had happened; as if the dazed and confused watcher had hallucinated the whole thing. But Loona hadn't. She hadn't hallucinated it at all, she was more than certain of it. She knew it was all real, all too inexplicably real — the TV had turned on by itself, played some movie decades old with some dazzling imagery, before shutting itself off just like that. Yes the display was over, but everything around felt like a blur in the aftermath. Something had happened. This was no hallucination. Not at all.

Gentle stirrings came from beside Loona, a lifting of a small head up from the soft cushioned armrest. Maya looked up groggily from the couch towards her babysitter, rubbing her eyes with a balled-up fist. She asked in her innocent but oblivious tone; "Aw-Are you okay?"

Loona didn't know. Not in the upset or distressed sort of way, not at all; in the most literal definition of the word, Loona really did not know. She was confused, dumbfounded, dazzled; her wide-eyed expression said as much. That internal feeling had died down too, but the aftertaste of an internal flurry hadn't gone away.

Now that Maya had awoken, Loona had to give an answer. Uneasily smiling and brushing her fringe aside, she replied; “Yeah. Yeah, I’m— I’m okay. How was your sleep?”

“It was good,” Maya quietly replied, marking the most she had talked all day. But she said no more after that.

Loona’s reply was a fainter utterance of “that’s good,” her attention focused more on the TV to make sure that it was indeed off. A flick of her eyes back to the black screen confirmed that it was switched off, the only thing staring back at the bewildered alternative woman was her reflection, donned in a wedding dress and tiara. She was, as a matter of fact, more than glad for it; technical glitch or otherwise, Loona wished that she would never see it again. A part of her thought about unplugging it altogether, for the time being at least.

Right as that idea teased Loona’s decision-making function, another far more pressing one sprung up. Then and there, she remembered the little box of dissolvable medication she was meant to administer through the means of hiding it in food. Something about that approach irked Loona, but apparently it was what she had to do.

Twisting around while still on the couch, Loona found the box still sitting out in the open in the kitchen. She had tossed it aside some time earlier, and apparently had landed at an angle vertically against the gray-tiled wall. It had landed perfectly adjacent with a miniature picture frame that contained the simple outline of a house: “Home Sweet Home,” it proudly announced in small bold letters, the only form of real coherent decoration the babysitter had seen thus far. But it still reeked of that same-old, sickeningly sterile lifestyle choice — Loona hated it, if not even more so the longer she stayed.

Figuring out her game plan on how to go about her task, Loona turned to Maya, only to find her gone again. The distant sound of the child’s bedroom door shutting announced her whereabouts; at least Loona didn’t need to go looking. Reluctantly getting off the couch, the disguised hound shuffled her way to the kitchen, going straight to the fridge and pulling out the fresh tub of boysenberry yogurt; it hadn’t even been opened yet. Already, and thankfully, this simple task was enough to drive Loona’s mind away from the strange film she had just watched — in a way, she had already forgotten about it.

“This better work, I fucking swear,” Loona grumbled through clenched teeth while grabbing a bowl and slapping a portion of yogurt in. At that point she didn’t care if the wedding gown got dirty, she’d wash it off later somehow.

As per instructions, she snapped one of the white pea-sized tablets in half and dunked it into the chilled serving. Almost as soon as it made contact, the halved capsule quickly lost shape, dissolving into a grainy clump sitting on top of the white and purple snack.

“Hey, kid! Come get your snack, got some yogurt for ya,” Loona called out, making her way down to Maya’s bedroom with bowl in hand. She mixed it around with the silver spoon as she shouted again; “Kid, come on! Food!”

Maya however didn’t seem to want to play ball, making Loona walk the entire way up to her bedroom; humiliating Princess costume and all. The now full-time servant knocked in thrice succession against the door, gentle but assertive. “Mayaa,” Loona called again, this time in a more approachable tone; “Can I come in?”

When no response came, Loona became impatient; “Ugh- Maya, please! Don’t make this harder for me than it already is.”

Determined to get this over and done with, the glorified servant opened the door to let herself in, finding Maya sitting on her bed curled up into a sort of ball.

“There you are,” Loona said as she invited herself in, her delivery a little more gruff than intended. Towering over the bed in all of her six feet, she offered the bowl of refrigerated dairy concoction; “Come on, eat up.”

All that Maya did was glance glumly at what was supposed to be her favorite. That's the other thing that Loona noticed about her, amongst everything else that she had seen; the ‘insatiable appetite’ that her mother had spoken about apparently didn’t exist. If it did indeed exist, it obviously wasn’t there at the moment.

Of course Loona took note of this, but she didn’t exactly bat an eye over it, chalking it up to just a kid being fussy as per usual. All that she knew was that Maya needed to take her medicine, and that was that. “What’s the matter with ya,” Loona said from more on the impatient side; “I thought you liked this stuff.”

The death glare that burnt through Maya’s previously innocent face made Loona inch back a bit. Nevermind that it looked genuinely unsettling, she didn’t even know a face like this from the child was possible. That’s when Maya quite glumly muttered the most words she had said all day; “You think I’m stupid...”

Loona's mouth flopped ajar when she heard this. She never remembered saying anything of the sort, and she was pretty damn certain nothing like that had been uttered. Still, Loona second-guessed; "When… did I say you were stu—"

"You didn't, but I know you think I am!" — Maya sounded wholly frustrated, her enclosed curled-up body language saying as much as she backed further into her bed. All at once the girl's nonverbal streak came to an end, as if it was nothing more than a brittle veil. The pitiful ball of misery pressed up against the wall continued to scorn; "Don't lie, I know you think it! I know you put those stupid pills in there! Mum told you to do that!"

And that was that; the game was up. The method of administering medicine had been exposed effortlessly, and the babysitter was left stunned. "Now hold on just a minute," Loona said assertively, setting the chilled bowl aside on the nightstand; "I'm just doing what your mom told me to do. Don't get all grouchy at me because you either can't, or won't take your pills."

"But I don't want them!" Maya let out a dramatic huff and curled up further, sounding exactly how every stubborn kid to ever exist sounded.

Loona rolled her eyes; "Well for some reason you need them, young lady, and I'm not here to question it! So c'mon, just take 'em for me. You'll feel better once you—"

"They don't! The-They're supposed to, but they don't!" — By now Maya's loud voice was beginning to crack, her head tucked into her folded arms. She jolted a little and hiccuped, and through the onset of tears the child croaked; "I'll never get better… I hate myself."

Alarms exploded inside Loona's head the instant Maya proclaimed those bold words; "Wooooaaahh-woah-woah-woah, hey! Hey, come on, what are ya doing saying that for?"

"Because it's true," Maya sulked, muffled from behind her folded arms. After a heartbreaking but sickly sniffle, she admitted; "I ha— I hate having to take them. All because of my stupid brain…"

It was this admission that made something inside Loona's head begin to tick over — something hadn't been explicitly told. As she sat down on the foot of the bed, the hound decided to get to the bottom of this. Far more tactfully, Loona asked; "Your brain, what's wrong with your brain?"

A pair of blue tearful eyes arose from behind Maya's folded arms. She asked almost disbelievingly; "You haven't read it..?"

No. As a matter of fact, Loona hadn't. She paid a casual glance at the jumble of words way earlier, but with her mind already focused on not buggering her job up, Loona had not taken the time to have a proper read of Maya's prescription. It was an entirely neglectful, irresponsible move, and only in the midst of Maya's distress did Loona finally realize this — she had buggered it up. For all the now guilt-ridden hound at last knew, she could've put too much of the capsule in.

Pursing her lips together, Loona swallowed then said; "Lemme just… Wait here a sec."

At once she sprung off the bed and made strides back towards the kitchen, cursing at herself under her breath all the way there. In short time she found the small rectangular box right where she left it, half-opened and left on the kitchen counter. Quickly Loona swiped it up, almost dropping it altogether as she flipped it to the description side. Printed in an outlined box was the fine print for the dissolvable capsules inside, outlining everything that was in need of knowing. All sorts of theories of what could be 'wrong' with Maya's brain ran through Loona's head, all of them just as concerning as the other — Epilepsy was the most worrying.

Adrenaline tensed up Loona's entire body as she finally got to reading; every paragraph, every sentence, every word. Every single last little detail, and not a stone was left unturned. Loona came to look for an answer — and what an answer it was. Towards the bottom of the extensive paragraphs printed in smaller than small text was a separate section on its own; a small list of the handful of disorders that the medication in question could be used to remedy.

One of them was circled in a fine red ink: **"ADHD."**

With the answer in hand Loona hurried back to Maya's bedroom, making it back in record time. Maya was still there curled into a ball in the corner of her bed, she hadn't moved.

As quick as she could, Loona settled herself back down on the bed, at this point not caring that the wedding dress bunched up. She didn't know what to say to Maya, an apology or otherwise. Looking down at the box in her hands, Loona stammered and shook her head; "Kid, I-… I-I didn't-.. shit. I didn't know that you were upset about… that you had… ohh-kay, it's making sense now. A whole lotta sense. I'm so sorry."

Though still teary-eyed, Maya looked confused. She sniffled; “What are you sorry for? It’s not your fault I’m like this. It’s mine…”

Again Loona’s eyes widened; “What? No-no, hey! Hey!” She placed a gentle hand on the bed, closer to the sad little ball; “Maya, listen to me. Wh-Why would that be your fault? Come on, it doesn’t make any sense! It’s-it’s just something you have, it’s nobody’s fault.”

“I don’t know..” groaned Maya from behind her sleeves — it sounded like she truly didn’t, without a doubt.

Intrusive thoughts were clearly the culprit. Intrusive thoughts were nothing new to Loona, who knew a concerning lot about them. She had experienced many throughout the years, a good number of those eerily similar to Maya’s own. It was sickening how Loona could see herself in this girl; how she was back in hell. In the adoption center, in the thick of it, curled up into a pitiful ball on some bed. At least Maya had a room of her own. Loona didn’t just feel pity and remorse — she felt sad.

The longer Loona stared in silence, hearing Maya’s muffled sniffles and efforts to stop herself from crying, the more she felt that raw sadness. She had to say something. With a long, drawn-out breath, Loona bit her lip pensively then muttered; “I know how you feel.”

Maya weakly raised her eyes; “Wuh-What..?”

“I know how you feel,” Loona repeated again, her voice mellow and full of memory. She gazed off into nothingness; “Just to feel that-... that somehow it’s your fault. That somehow, for whatever goddamn reason, the reason why you’re suffering, or how you feel about yourself is entirely on you. … But it’s not.” The pensive young woman turned back to look at Maya, and she tried to smile; “It’s not your fault. You might feel it is, but those are just that — feelings. Feelings are great, they’re awesome! But there’s other feelings, um… thoughts that are bad, and they’re not true. And they’re stubborn, as in they sorta don’t go away. Think of them as… ‘sticky’ thoughts.”

“S-Sticky..?”

“Yeah. Sticky,” Loona nodded, that faint half-smile of hers reappearing again; “They’re the worst ones too, because no matter how much you try on your own, you can’t seem to get rid of them. Just disgustingly, frustratingly… sticky. But here’s the thing; they’re only sticky if you let them be.”

Maya became still as she thought about it. Wiping her nose with the top of her hand, she whimpered quietly; “But… But I don’t let them. I don’t want them– *snff* –I don’t want them to bother me.”

“No-no, I’m not saying you do,” was Loona’s quicker correction; “I meant it in a… uh… You know how sometimes people can fuc– uhh, st-stuff things up, though they don’t mean to? That’s how those thoughts happen. You don’t mean to have them, but they just happen. And when they do, it’s the grossest feeling in the world. … But they’re not a part of you. They don’t have to be.”

For a second, Loona waited patiently for Maya to finish wiping her eyes, then proceeded in that same gentle way. “Here’s the trick,” the mentor said, tapping her hand against the mattress to rekindle Maya’s attention; “Ya gotta ask yourself, like really ask yourself, if it’s true. Believe it or not, the answer’s pretty much always no.”

The pep talk seemed to be having an upward effect, with Maya having calmed down enough to give Loona’s advice a proper think. “And when it isn’t,” she muttered, phrased more as a hypothetical question.

Blatant was the nature of this question; doubt. “Okay, see, that’s those sticky thoughts talking,” Loona pointed out quite urgently, catching it at the roots; “That’s exactly what I’m talking about. Not gonna answer that either, ‘cause if I do, that’s gonna make you think about it more. Any thoughts that make you feel less than dirt, like what you just asked, you immediately dismiss as being not true. It’s a lie!”

“But-… But what if—…” Maya’s would-be repetition was interrupted by the raised-eyebrow look Loona gave. While definitely firm, it was only out of compassion; for the good of things. Silent and finally getting it, Maya nodded slowly; “I-I believe you,” she squeaked, sounding like she seriously wanted to.

The relief Loona felt then and there was comforting; not just for herself, but for Maya’s sake too. It might not have been much, but she felt that she had broken a cycle; a cycle she was all too familiar with. Or at least, she tried to break it.

“Good,” Loona said, smiling gently again; “You should. Just remember what I told you, okay? Anytime they come up, just tell yourself they’re lies. You do that, it’ll be a whole lot easier to unstick them.”

Maya's demeanor was still conflicted; as expected, but still heartbreaking. Loona could tell clearly that though she wanted to believe it, the idea the child had believed that her "flaw" was her fault had become so entrenched, that it was hard to shake. Hard, but not impossible. After a little while of thinking, Maya looked up with sad eyes at her caretaker, but hope shone through — dim, but new and discovered. That's when she finally shifted from her corner of misery, and crawled slowly across the mattress to sit on the edge, directly beside Loona.

Loona paid a glance to the kid while she sat there, trying to think of what else to say. Those thoughts were interrupted when she was shoved by two small arms that had suddenly wrapped tight around her waist — one massive hug.

At first Loona was stunned, tensing up at the sudden pressure which was remarkably strong. This subsided when, all things considered with the subject at hand, this was probably what Maya needed. The gothic "princess'" lips up-turned into a smile; "Hey, it's okay," she soothed and almost laughed, wrapping her own arms around the smaller figure as best she could, despite the awkward side posture.

The hug lasted for a little while, the few seconds Loona assumed it would last for turning into ten seconds, then crept steadily towards twenty. At last it ended with her patting Maya on the back. "Feel better," Loona asked, surprising herself with how gentle she sounded.

Maya's nod of 'yes' was slow, but it was a nod nonetheless. Pulling away from her babysitter, she scooted over to her nightstand and retrieved the bowl. It had gone slightly warmer from being outside the fridge, but it was still chilled.

Seeing Maya begin to eat the yogurt-medicine mixture didn't seem right to Loona, considering the episode that had happened barely five minutes ago. "Maya– Hey, c'mon. You don't have to eat it if you don't wanna," Loona piped up, watching as Maya prodded the bowl with the silver spoon.

Maya shook her head; "It's okay. It helps me," she admitted, then ate her first serving. Those little blue eyes lit up when the boysenberry flavor kicked in, the second spoonful eaten with that bit more enthusiasm.

Loona sat there and watched Maya, seeing her mood improve bit by bit after her tell-all. She had just witnessed the power of strong emotions, but she hadn't just witnessed it; she was within it too, as much as Maya was. That timidness and reluctance to communicate verbally had vanished in

those minutes, so that her true feelings could be made known. Maya was a little wonder, but perhaps not in the way her mother meant it.

Speaking of which, the emo lady had one other question. “Can I just ask,” Loona began, right as Maya had another spoonful; “Why are you so… talkative all of a sudden? Not that it’s bad, it’s not! It’s just that, you know, you were so quiet earlier.”

Maya kept eating without a pause, but she replied with a quick and simple; “I don’t like to talk sometimes.”

Loona loved this answer, adored it even; “Psh! Yeah yeah, I get that.”

Ten minutes past midnight.

That was the time that taunted Loona from her phone’s screen on the fifth time she checked it. A sneer was given and she tossed the phone away, wedging itself between her leg and the couch’s backrest. Huffing loudly, Loona lay dormant on her makeshift bed, staring through sandpaper eyes up at the featureless ceiling.

In short, Loona couldn’t sleep. Not that she hadn’t, having gotten roughly two hours after Maya had gone to bed, but the gothic’s sleep was on-and-off. It was a very uneven sleep, constantly breaking, having woken up at least three times already since she ‘hit the hay’ around three hours ago. Loona had tried everything; from simply sitting there with her eyes closed, tossing and turning this way and that, and putting her faith in every single sleeping position imaginable. Nothing had worked.

She kept thinking about that film. That live-action black and white film, whatever it was supposed to be. Something about it kept Loona up, and she felt like it had spoken to her. The words of the elder of the two men repeated in her head: ***“Everything is an eternal circle, and it repeats and repeats itself.”***

Then came the words of the younger man, his question vivid word-for-word: ***“Do you think you can do good single-handed?”***

“Urrgh…” Loona whimpered incoherently in deep exhaustion, running both hands up her face and into her hair. She lethargically adjusted her crop top and shorts, having set aside the wedding dress as soon as Maya went off to dreamland.

Again Loona tried to fall asleep, rolling onto her side to face right into the backrest, bringing her legs into a fetal position. She steadily closed her eyes, relaxed all of her muscles, and tried to sleep. … Her eyelids reeled back open.

“Fuuuuck…” Loona raspily wailed, making the decision to rise upright like a vampire at midnight; all that was missing was a pair of fangs and pointed ears.

Out of a loss for what else to do, the sleep-deprived babysitter peeled herself off the couch, and lumbered a slow, staggering walk towards the bathroom. Feeling her pale-skinned hands around the wall, Loona found the light switch for the hallway, and with a blinding change in lighting, the hallway was lit. The disguised hound shielded her eyes and grunted, rubbing them both and blinking so she could regain sight, all the while she stumbled slowly through the bathroom door.

The bathroom’s sole tube light bulb flickered on, lighting up the room with its unmatched, obnoxious white glow — its latest occupant always hated these types of lights, the urge to smash it all-too tempting. There Loona stopped in front of the mirror, its surface almost spotless, save for the small collection of water splatter marks dotted near the sink.

Loona examined her tired self and smirked; “You look like death,” she remarked to herself, prodding the dark circles under her eyes that were just beginning to form.

As she examined her reflection, Loona went *“eh, fuck it,”* and in one swift motion came out of her human form. There now stood a lone hellhound, clear as day, regaining her natural couple or so extra inches in height, but still looking tired as ever. The practically sleep-deprived Loona sighed as she patted down her pelt, combing it all with her fingers to make herself look at least somewhat presentable — not for anyone in particular.

Just as Loona thought she had expelled any memory of the film from earlier, in a few seconds flat the vivid image of it all came back. More specifically, the quote from the youngest of the two, repeating and repeating itself — ***“Do you think you can do good single-handed?”*** — It became agitating, just how persistent, how unrelenting the question was. Thinking about it, Loona didn’t blame the older man from that scene for becoming agitated himself, putting his foot down the way he went about it.

The nature of the question was naive, inexperienced, assumptive… ignorant. That was a good word for it, Loona thought; just downright ignorant. Or could it have been a question with a different meaning; a meaning that wasn't as straightforward as a rushed interpretation might assume? Was it a question that was, perhaps for the viewer, a trick sort of question, where to 'do good' was generally speaking, instead of the literal sense in everyday actions. For all the hound deep in thought knew, the question might've been meant to challenge the mind on concepts such as morality, and 'rights and wrongs'. A question to make one think — and damn, did it make Loona think. It was this memory, this nagging question, that had ultimately kept her up.

But what did Loona figure? Can you do good single-handed?

Blitz threw the door wide open and marched back into the apartment, a delirious-looking Loona following closely behind. Her fingers and knuckles echoed a stinging sensation from twenty minutes earlier, spatters of an imp's black blood dotting the fur on the hound's knuckles.

The ex-circus imp's voice was shrill and angry; "For fuck sakes, Loona, for fucking-fuck sakes!! What the actual hell were you thinking, running off like that! Then I find you mauling someone's kid, what the actual fuck is wrong with you?!"

"Ohhh, give me a BREAK," Loona snarled right back after the silent walk of shame, slamming the front door behind her with frightening force; "Quit with the 'concerned dad' bullshit, you pathetic shithead! You're not my dad, why don't you get it?!"

Loona, the unstoppable force, met Blitz, equally as stubborn; "NO, you give ME a break! I've been trying so hard to give you a home, so damn hard, and you run off and do this?! Not to mention the mess you left behind, I mean look at this place!"

A row of sharp teeth was revealed through Loona's deep scowl. "You know what your problem is," the orphan clapped back, a sharp accusatory finger jabbed in her new "father's" direction; "Your massive motherfucking problem? You don't know when to give the fuck up! You-You just don't know when to quit with me! So why don't you get to cleaning this place up, and leave me the hell ALONE!!"

With that Loona marched off to her room, not stopping even as Blitz cried out to her in the name of reason. But the hound didn't want reason; she wanted isolation. She wanted nothing more than to be left alone; being alone was all she knew. Soon as Loona slammed her bedroom door shut, tears began streaming down her cheeks post-haste. The smooth surface of the door guided Loona down as she slid to the floor, curling herself into one big hopeless ball.

Taunting came from outside, in the form of Blitz's beckoning; *"Loona, c'mon, we can figure this out! You can talk to me, I promise!"*

Loona's eyes became evil, and even more angry than she already was; "What's with you… What is this— This game you're playing? It's not funny… *snff!* It's not…"

"I'm not playing any games with you, Loona, trust me! I-I wouldn't do that to ya, as if I would. Come on, we can talk this out, I know how it feels to feel alone!"

"Stop trying to understand me," Loona bellowed with a shattering, tearful wail; "You can't! Wuh-What is it, you think you can just— *hic!* —you can do good for me? You can do good, just like that?! Newsflash for ya Einstein, life doesn't work like that!"

"No, it isn't like that! I know! ... But at the very least, let me try for you. I can only try, you just need to give me a chance. Just a chance, that's all I ask for!"

There came no reply from Loona, though she heard this loud and clear. Instead she winced, sinking into herself even more, trying to escape reality. How could that imp do good in a world like the one the hound lived in? Impossible. Hopelessly impossible.

Or was it?

Crrk-!

Something wooden shifted to Loona's right, startling her to the point where, now wide-eyed, she snapped her head around.

…

Maya was standing just outside the bathroom. Her hands were clenched tightly around a stuffed animal, this one a white lamb with a bow so tight in the girl's grip. What's more she looked petrified, her mouth left ajar to complete a look of unmatched overwhelming fear. The look in her eyes was nothing that a child deserved to feel — fear for her life.

Just as frozen where she stood was Loona, gawking back with a feeling of "oh shit" repeating over and over inside her head. But the hellhound couldn't panic, no, she couldn't afford to. She had gotten this far, and there was no way she was going to bugger it up now — not that this wasn't already one massive stuff-up.

Wide-eyed and frozen, Loona swallowed the lump in her throat, and through the worst form of déjà vu tried with all her might to form words. Slowly and hindered with a verbal stagger, she forced out; "M–… Maya?"

Maya scurried off in fright, bolting as fast as her legs could carry her — The "game" was up.

Loona snapped into action, staggering quickly right after the horrified child in a sprint, desperately crying out for her; "Maya! No-No, kid wait!"

The fur-clad female canine ran like mad, skidding across the bathroom's tiles in a tumble, just catching herself before her face could collide with the wall. Loona frantically shot her head upright, just catching a glimpse of Maya who retreated like a terrified dog for the living room.

Breathlessly Loona gasped and scrambled to stand upright, again shouting aloud; "Maya! Maya!!"

"WHAM — CRASH!!" — The stomach-churning sound of a dull collision filled the house, followed immediately by the deafening racket of something big and fragile breaking. A bad situation had just gotten a whole lot worse.

Now beyond horrified for what she might find, Loona bolted like mad, practically throwing herself through the entranceway with enough momentum to shake the floorboards. The panicked hound

threw on the light switch with trembling hands, not caring if the flash of light blinded her as she frantically searched for whatever disaster had just unfolded.

What Loona found was slightly less dramatic than whatever she imagined. The indiscernible statue that was the living room's main feature had toppled over, and was now nothing more than a scatter of copper-colored shards strewn across the floor. Still a disaster, but it wasn't nothing Loona couldn't fix. What did worry her was Maya's disappearance.

Loona's midnight chase continued; "Maya! Cuh-Come on, where are you!"

Right as she said this, Loona caught the short, sharp sound of a restricted breath, a sound so faint and fickle that if she breathed any louder, she would've drowned it out altogether. Maya was still here, but where? Taking the easy option, Loona sniffed at the air almost out of instinct, catching the unmistakable metallic smell of… blood.

Loona's eyes widened to their limit, and she spun her head to her right. Sure enough the hound found half of the child's head, hiding just out of range of the light in the refuge of the kitchen. She was cowering just behind the counter, half her head sticking out to see the abomination that had just charged in.

Without thinking Loona went to approach the kid, only to provoke a fearful yelp from her. Loona stopped dead where she was, reeling back with hands stretched out; "No-no-no, Maya, it's me! It's-It's me, it's Loona!"

But Maya was in no position to listen. Right as the tall, bipedal wolf-beast tried to reason, Maya tried to make a run for it, stumbling out of her hiding spot. Her flee ended when she fell over with a sickening "THUMP," curling on her side as she cried out in fear and agony all at the same time.

Just the look in the eight-year-old's eyes told Loona all that she already expected, and feared. Maya was inconsolably terrified, and she was crying hard, her would-be wailings suppressed into short, sharp breaths. It was obvious what Maya was trying to do; silence her crying so that the she-wolf wouldn't hear. That's when Loona noticed something more; the streak of blood running from Maya's knee down her leg, staining through the leg of her yellow pajama pants.

What a mess — a complete and utterly avoidable mess. Overbearing guilt overcame Loona, and with that came the painful realization of how Maya saw her — she was a monster. One tall, furry, horrifying monster. To Maya, her babysitter was meant to be her protection from all of that, only to

end up being one of them; ‘trauma’ wasn’t enough to describe the horror this defenseless child was going through. It was the stuff of nightmares. And it was all the castaway hellhound’s fault.

Loona wanted to do many things then and there; scream, punish herself, even escape to somewhere far away into the dead of night, never to be seen again. … But she couldn’t, she knew she couldn’t. She had been here this long, and had already committed too much of her time to this job. This was Loona’s mess to clean up, and frankly despite her overwhelming guilt, she had more than a gut-full of running away. No more. She was going to fix this, or die trying.

Stifling her own sharp heavy breathing, Loona calmed herself, focusing solely on Maya still on the floor. The display was pitiful, and the hound desperately wanted to rush to her aid, but doing so like that would only make things worse. She had to be methodical.

“Maya, c’mon,” Loona beckoned, lowering her tone and lowering herself closer to the floor; “Maya you gotta listen to me, listen to my voice! You-You recognise me, right? My voice, you recognise my voice?”

It took Maya a bit of extra to focus, wheezing through sobs and clenched teeth. Eventually she faintly nodded, managing to do so despite her terrified shivering. She weakly brought herself to sit upright, crying out with saddening whimpers as the wound in her leg strained.

“Maya, you’re—... You’re bleeding. Where did ya hurt yourself? The-The statue, was it the statue, over there?” The statue Loona pointed to no longer existed, as she saw, its scattered clay remains being all that was left. How she was going to explain that one to Maya’s mother was beyond her for the time being.

Maya shut her eyes tight, and she nodded again with even more tears; this time with an evident tinge of guilt. None of this was her fault however, and Loona rightfully had already taken the blame; if only Maya knew this.

“No-no, Maya! Maya, c’mon,” Loona beckoned desperately, giving it her all to de-escalate; “None of this is your fault, you hear me? It isn’t! We’re gonna fix this, okay? We’re– we’re gonna fix this... I’ll fix this. Wait here!”

“Do you think you can do good single-handed?”

In a single bound Loona jumped up and rushed off to the bathroom. Earlier on another bathroom trip, she had remembered seeing a little red box full of medical supplies, there had to be some form of a bandage in there. Loona's plan of attack was this; fix Maya's leg up, make amends with her by explaining as much as she could, then clean up whatever mess was leftover. The success rate however was still up in the air.

Loona barged into the bathroom and immediately started pillaging the cupboards, searching for wherever she found that damned red box. Soon she found it, tucked directly underneath the kitchen sink. Opening it revealed a fully-stocked assortment of bandages, bandaids, and everything in-between. Luck was apparently on the hellhound's side.

Wasting no time at all Loona slammed it shut, then ran like hell back to the kitchen, only slowing down so as not to frighten Maya; not that she wasn't already.

Soon as Maya was in view, Loona ground to a halt and retained her crouching from earlier. The girl, still shaking, whimpered and reeled back at the reemergence of the wolf humanoid.

"Huff— Okay… Kid, I need you to listen to me," Loona gently tried to console, beginning her plan of attack; "You're gonna need to show where you hurt yourself, alright? I'll patch you up."

Understandably Maya still didn't trust Loona's words, considering the sharp-toothed canine mouth from which they were being spoken from.

Considering the situation, Loona completely understood. To go further, she wouldn't blame Maya if she feared, even outright hated her after this was over. Still, Loona pushed on; "Please, Maya, come on. I'm not gonna hurt you, I promise." Then the gothic hound did something last-minute, perhaps out of desperation; in one gentle movement she sat down on the floor, extending her hand out in an open palm. Loona pleaded softly; "Let me help you."

The sight of Loona's towering silhouette was without saying still terrifying to Maya, Loona herself could see that clear as day. But something changed, a pause. Maya managed to properly take hold of her shiverings and sobs, until all that was left were quiet hiccups and wide, bloodshot eyes. What the eight-year-old saw was still a terrifying monster, but one that to her confusion wasn't making any effort to hurt. If the babysitter really was a monster of some kind, then she seemed to be a friendly one. Perhaps not all of them were bad, bloodthirsty creatures.

Then came movement. Slow, careful, timid movement, but nevertheless Maya began to inch out of her curled-up state. A small hand moved away from clutching the small stuffed lamb, and carefully inched towards the black and white hand. Maya tensed up when her fingers finally met Loona's palm… but when the humanoid remained still and inviting, Maya too became that bit less fearful.

Loona's mouth crept into a reassuring smile, one she had to reach deep into her heart to make; "See? What did I tell ya."

Maya almost couldn't believe it, not that any part of what was happening could be believed in the first place. But still, little by little, she began to trust.

Loona could see as much too. Considering the fact little Maya saw life flash before her eyes barely minutes ago, she was being quite brave about it all. In a way, it made the hound proud. "Alright," Loona said, giving Maya's shoulder an encouraging pat; "Let's see that wound."

Now came the hard part. Maya was hesitant at first, but eventually she found the courage to roll up her blood-stained pant leg. Sure enough there was the injury, and no small one at that; a long laceration that ran the length of the knee down to the middle of the lower leg. In the time since it happened, the wound had clotted somewhat, but some blood still trickled. The accident definitely was as big as it sounded.

It was enough to make the wolf-like being recoil. "Uff— Eeeesh, yeeeahh… Yeah, that's pretty bad," Loona winced and gritted her teeth, grabbing the length of bandage out from the first-aid kit.

Folding the fresh white wrapping around the crook of her arm, Loona first pulled out a cloth and bottle of disinfectant. Dousing the cloth with the treatment, she guided wounded Maya through the process; "Gonna need you to be brave for me, alright? This is gonna sting a bit."

And by all that existed, did it sting. Soon as Loona applied the soaked cloth and began to press it with care, Maya yelped and struggled to keep still. She was trying her hardest to be brave, that much the babysitter turned nurse could tell.

"There there, you're doing good," Loona encouraged, holding the poor girl's hand for that extra bit of comfort; "Hang in there, we're almost done."

The wound still ached tremendously, made even worse so by the stinging from the disinfectant, but in due time it was all over. All that was left to do was to add the bandage, which Loona did, wrapping it snug around the treated wound, neat and proper.

“Huff— There! All done,” Loona announced, looking up from her handiwork and at the girl drying her eyes; “All better?”

“Yeah… I’m sorry about the statue. I-I didn’t mean to! I got scared, and I—”

“Nonono, hey! Enough of that,” Loona quickly snapped to action, horrified that it was Maya who was the one apologising; “That isn’t your fault… It's mine. This whole thing tonight’s my fault.”

The cogs inside Maya’s tired head turned over, but she didn’t understand; “But… But I tripped on it.”

“And I was the one that scared you,” Loona exclaimed with exalted assertion; “Like c’mon, think for a sec! If I hadn’t scared you, that… thing, whatever it was, that would’ve been left where it is, it’d still be up! But I scared you. You got scared, and-and you panicked, and…” The rambling hellhound paused for a second, and considered how absurd it was that she was persistently trying to excuse herself. She sighed sharply, and changed course; “...Maya, just–... Believe me when I say I’m sorry. For scaring you.”

Listening to this heartfelt apology seemed to make things that bit better for Maya. Rubbing her sore eyes with her sleeve, the girl muttered; “It’s okay. … But what are you?”

“Me? … I… I’m a-...” Loona dithered hard, her explanation going nowhere. There was no easy way to explain what she was. But she couldn’t just tell the poor girl outright that she was a hellhound, it would frighten her even more! There had to be another way, another way to put it — the truth, but a softer version of the truth. Suddenly it dawned on Loona, and without hesitation she went with it; “I’m a… You’re not gonna believe me, but I’m a magician.”

The previously frightened child blinked, her eyes still sore from her ordeal from earlier; “A magician…?”

“Ye-Yeah,” the “magician” nodded; “A magician, a– uhh, *goddammit what are they called*... OH— a witch! This is just, um… yanno, one of my many forms. It’s a trick!”

“But… But witches are bad,” Maya pointed out.

Loona exhaled a little, finding it an irritatingly good point; “Yeah well, I’m a good witch! I like to think so, at least… My, uh, magic skills are a bit rusty, sooo I decided to practice tonight.”

As expected, Maya looked like she didn’t at all understand why a “good witch” would be inside her house, let alone be babysitting her until her mother got back. But Maya would be lying to herself if she didn’t find it at least a little bit exciting, if not still terrifying, considering the “wolf witch’s” form.

Questions began piling up in a backlog inside Maya's inquisitive mind; “Why are your eyes red? Are you tired?”

“Shit, am I ever,” Loona whispered under her breath, then answered proper; “Uhm.. Just, that’s how my eyes look, I guess? I dunno, it’s just one of those things.”

“One of what?”

“It’s a saying, don’t think about it,” Loona huffed; “Anyway, you gotta start heading off to bed. It is waaay past your bedtime, and I don’t wanna be up for too much longer either. Your leg okay?”

“It hurts, but… but I think it’s okay.”

“Hey, it’s better than nothing,” was Loona’s belief, who then extended her hand out again to Maya. “Here, I’ll carry you to bed.”

In one careful precise movement and an *“Uuup you get,”* Loona lifted up Maya from the ground and into the newfound safety of her fluffy arms. Quickly Maya winded down and got comfortable in Loona’s cradling, hesitantly latching onto the shape-shifting “witch” with a wide-mouthed yawn.

The fear the brunette-haired girl felt had since subsided, and all that was left was a regained but uneasy sense of trust. Luckily for her, Loona had no intention to break that trust either.

One short one-way trip later, Maya had been tucked into bed with a clean pair of pajamas. After tossing the blood-stained set of clothes in the laundry, Loona made it back to Maya's bedroom with a boisterous yawn of her own.

"Uuuaagghh! Goddamn..." the tall dog-woman groaned, carrying herself in a slog over to the equally tired child. Loona landed heavily on the same spot she had been earlier during her one-on-one pep talk, the relief of being off her leaden feet almost euphoric.

After rubbing her eyes, Loona took lethargic notice of something strewn on the ground. She blinked at it, bent down and picked it up, squinting at the cover. "Wuh-… The hell's this," Loona asked, more talking to herself instead of Maya.

Nevertheless Maya responded, exploding to life with frantic grabby hands; "Oh, Oh! That's mine! Gimme!"

More and more as her tired red eyes focused and her pupils adjusted, Loona soon deciphered what the floppy multi-paged thing was in her hands. It was one of those five-dollar Royal gossip magazines she had seen around, mostly tucked in the corner of stores collecting dust. This particular one was barely a few weeks old, judging by the publishing date printing in bold. The headline above the glum-looking face of Australia's King was laughable: ***"He's going to betray me!" Sussex's latest move!"***

A wide, snide and humorous grin spread across Loona's snout, exposing pretty much all of her teeth; "Oh shit, this is rich… Hahah! Ohh come on now, Maya, you're joking!"

"Whaat," Maya whined, not seeing what was so hilarious.

On the contrary, Loona did; "What do ya mean, 'whaat'? You read this crap? Royal magazines, I mean seriously! Next thing you're gonna tell me is that you believe a single word of it."

The serious pouty look on Maya's face told the incredulous hound that the girl, in fact, believed what she had just so blatantly mocked.

At once the hound's mouth fell dramatically agape, left completely speechless by the wordless confession. But Loona couldn't help herself, beginning to titter and shake her head. She chuckled; "Psh-sh-sh… Maya. Maya, Maya, Maya… Let me tell ya something about that toilet paper in your hands. This bullshit here? It's a gossip magazine! They're all just here to make money and are full of lies, I would know! I mean I've read a few… or more than a few, so it doesn't make me any better… but still, come on girl!"

Maya pouted hard and folded her arms, squeezing her stuffed lamb tight; "Oh yeah? And what would you know about this stuff, huh!"

Loona opened her mouth to argue, but she stopped to blink and left her mouth to hang there. Truth is she didn't know a lot about living realm royalty. Not that much at all, other than some stories online she had read about some questionable ginger-haired guy and his wife. Loona had more than a gutful of any form of royalty whatsoever, considering the whole mess she was in. Especially one particular owl; now there was a basket case royal.

"So… what," Loona diverged, thawing the ice between herself and the apparent miniature royalist; "You into royalty and all that? No joking, you're being for real right now?"

Maya excitedly nodded, adding a little "mhm" right in the middle. She was being entirely serious.

To this Loona raised her brows; it explained the whole 'dress-up' thing from earlier, flowing white dress and all. In truth, the hellhound didn't know whether to be flattered or dismissive of the fact Maya saw her as royalty material in the first place. Still, Loona couldn't exactly say that she didn't enjoy it, somewhat.

"Aight, you do you," came Loona's word of "capitulation," allowing Maya to emerge victorious. Mindlessly the wolf-being got back up, and began to lumber for her couch-turned-bed. It had been a long night.

"Wait!" Maya called out once again, apparently not done tormenting her babysitter just yet.

Loona's finger was just about to flick off the light, when she paused to Maya's beckoning. The exhausted hound groaned low and long, grabbed the ridge of her fluffy brow, and a little too bluntly said; "Iswearthiskid— Yes, what."

“Can you stay until I sleep?”

One request. One small request was all it was, yet to Loona in her exhaustion, it still felt like she was asking for the world. What’s more, out of obligation for both her role as the babysitter and that night’s events, she couldn’t exactly say no. And thus, to fulfill her duty while screaming internally, Loona returned to her post.

Trying her hardest not to lose consciousness, Loona whimpered out a passing question; “Your leg any better..?”

“Mhm.”

“Good… Huff— That’s good.”

Soon silence was achieved, the sort of unique silence only observed at midnight, as was roughly the hour. How quiet it was, it felt like one giant well-deserved reprieve, especially to Loona who had just navigated through the impossible. In that, she felt that she had gone above and beyond, yet not beyond enough — So much, yet so little. Surely something as massive, as gigantic as the fright Maya got from finding out a large wolf-beast was in her midst warranted something way more.

This thought prompted Loona to turn her head to Maya, opening her mouth to speak. But Maya was already fast asleep, out like a fickle light in half a minute flat. The hellhound, still guilty about it all, buttoned her mouth shut and silently got up, at long last making her way to bed after her great trial. As she almost slept-walked, lapsing in-and-out of near sleep, Loona thought about what she could do for Maya later on. Something memorable.

She apparently like royalty, for whatever reason. Royalty… Kings, Queens… Emperors… Emperors…

Loona had an idea.

Bygone

The flimsy, fragile little blue hatchback Loona drove rocked dramatically as soon as the tyres hit the rough tarmac driveway, not taking the change in gradient and surface too well. A morning's half-hour drive had just been completed, ending right at the last place Loona figured she'd ever return to: Saint Basil's. No, not that one.

Though the gate was open, old Saint Basil's looked deserted, as it did on most of the occasions Loona had paid a visit. She wondered why it was that a church, which only had around two to three services a week according to its public schedule, always seemed to remain open at all times. A question for one certain aging bearded resident, to be sure. Apparently Saint Basil's was open indefinitely, whether rain, hail, or shine. Luckily for Loona, this appeared to be the case.

The driver pulled the vehicle to a crawling pace, and she looked out to search for any signs of life. But aside from a pair of sparrows swooping through the air in a long, gliding duet, there was nobody in sight.

"Where is this place," Maya finally piped up from the passenger's seat directly behind Loona. The girl had just awoken from her twenty-minute nap, catching up from the sleep she had lost the night before. What a night that was.

"Somewhere new," Loona announced with much feigned enthusiasm, but this charade was pointless.

The reluctant "witch" hound, now back in her human guise, knew that Maya could tell she didn't want to be here. Coming back here meant having to catch up with the ever persistent clergymen, who for whatever reason, compassion or otherwise, seemed so utterly persistent in finding out how the alternative young woman was going. Not that her wellbeing was his business to begin with, at least that's what Loona thought quite emphatically.

In all honesty, having some complete stranger constantly on lookout for her was to Loona a thorn in her side. Not a bad thorn, or a thorn necessarily, but more a miniscule splinter that no matter how hard she tried, wouldn't budge. A more suitable descriptor, Loona thought in that moment, was an itch. Just an old Russian itch.

Maya chimed from behind Loona again, her first question having not been answered properly; “What is this place?”

Loona stifled the urge to groan; “Somewhere new, I already told ya. Somewhere fun!”

“But what is it, a church,” Maya queried further, gazing out the window with growing awareness of her surroundings; “Why would this place be fun?”

“Just, like— Use your imagination, I dunno,” Loona bluntly returned, in the middle of unbuckling her seatbelt and throwing the door open; “Come on! I’m gonna show you something.”

In one swift flawless motion, Loona threw on her black jacket over her crop top, using her heel to slam the car door shut at the same time. Maya crawled out soon after, blinking like mad to adjust to the bright outdoors, a sharp contrast to the gloominess of being behind tinted windows.

Loona was quick to help guide Maya along by grabbing her hand in a cast iron unshakable grip, not once leaving the child out of her sight. In a low saunter both child and babysitter walked, the guardian of the two still searching for any signs of someone being around; not in the hope of finding someone, but so as to make sure they’d be left alone. She had enough excitement for the past twenty-four hours.

Diverting attention away from scanning her surroundings, Loona turned her head forward and pointed her free hand; “Here, see? Look!” She clicked her fingers in thrice rapid succession, getting her to look in that direction.

Maya had been busy looking around herself, but when she set eyes on the thing Loona was snapping at, she couldn’t take her eyes off it. There in the courtyard of greenery and an old gigantic tree towering over it, was a massive bronze statue. It was tall and towering to Loona, but to Maya it was the most gigantic thing she had ever seen; a bearded man in uniform, his left hand beside a crown on a pedestal, his right cupped on the handle of his sword. He stared straight ahead, gazing with an authority much declared by his presence alone. He spoke no words, but he commanded in a silent, uncompromisable, yet balanced way.

The visiting girl’s silence alone and look of awe was enough for Loona to figure what Maya made of it. Loona snorted at the reaction if anything, and asked with a smirk; “Cool, right?”

It took a second for the question to hit Maya's consciousness, but when it did; "That's so cool! Who is that? Is-Is he someone important? Wh-Why does he have that sword, what does it—"

"Woah-woah-woah, easy," Loona tried to tame the excitable midget; "I'm about as cluey here as you. Dunno half of these things myself!"

"For shame!" — From behind came an unmistakable voice, an accent of a very telling Eastern quality.

It was immediately obvious to Loona who it was, who grimaced and secretly rolled her eyes upward. "Urrgghh, it's you… Hooray," she said with a greeting that stank of sarcasm, the dismay she felt heavy on her tongue.

Finishing rolling her eyes, Loona turned around, of course finding that certain same-old bearded man shuffling across the grass. Where he had come from she didn't know, but nevertheless there he was, honing in with that "carefree" hobble of his as if his advanced age didn't concern him.

The old yet youthful Father Aleksander came to a flawless stop, standing still without even an inkling of being off kilter. "I see you're doing well," he observed, his white-bearded face wrinkling upwards into a pleased smile.

"Oh yes, I'm doing so, so well! Just fine and peachy," Loona retorted with her face distorting into a frown, seldom returning the warmth she was receiving. *"Until you came along…"* she added under her breath, hissing through her teeth.

Right as she said this, Loona noticed a second figure approaching from just outside her peripheral. Not a priest this time, but a casually dressed young man in a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt with Nike branding.

"Two of you. Great," Loona moaned further in a half-mutter. She really didn't like the extra company, that much was plain to see, and hear.

Despite the less than warm reception to his presence or the young man's, Father Aleksander sought out the better of this increasingly frequent victor. "You don't abhor us as much as all that," the old clergyman said, sounding confident in that observation; "You have come back, haven't you?"

“Yeah, I have, reluctantly! I’m only here because of her,” Loona at once corrected, gesturing to the girl still mesmerised by the garden’s main feature. When the gothic babysitter noticed this, she gawked at Maya’s hyperfixation; “Are you seriously still staring at him??”

The gothic’s little companion was busy reading the plaque, the cast iron board exactly at her eye level. “And who’s this,” Father Aleksander asked in turn, bringing his tone of voice up a friendly octave.

Almost out of impulse, Loona, folding her arms, told the inquisitive old man; “Nobody, she’s just a kid I’m being paid to babysit. It’s no big deal.”

“I see, I see,” came Father Aleksander’s acknowledging nod, before asking with a wide, amicable smirk; “Is it paying well?”

Loona’s eyes bulged open, and she scoffed with a broken smile; “I hope! Say where’s the other guy, uhm… ah shit, what’s his name? You know, the guy that hates my guts?”

“Not here today. Father Andrei doesn’t hate you,” the veteran priest said in confidence, sounding almost disappointed that the woman before him would assume such a thing; “He’s only weary and concerned about you. That’s understandable, considering how we found you only a week ago.”

Though having only happened just the week prior, Loona had honestly forgotten about the whole thing, her body having effectively suppressed the memory. The disguised hound’s demeanor dampened to this rekindled reminder. “Oh, yeah. That,” she murmured, pursing her lips into a thin line; “Sorry.”

The ongoing conversation finally managed to interrupt Maya’s thorough inspection, and she twisted around; “What happened,” she asked, innocently ignorant of what had happened.

“Nothing Maya, don’t worry about it,” Loona dismissed with a wave of her hand; “Oh, wait! Didn’t you have some questions for this guy here?”

Maya's head nodded vigorously, brimming with excitement; "Yeah!" She pointed excitedly up to the statue; "Who is he! Was he a King? He's dressed as one, he has to be!"

Father Aleksander looked wholly surprised and amused by this and turned to the younger man beside him, gesturing to the brunette child who was more than eager to find out more. Both Russians shared a light-hearted titter, before the elder turned back to Loona; "She's got a good eye. Attentive!"

"Hah! Yeah yeah," Loona agreed in a grin, throwing a hand to the statue; "Maya's a sucker for royalty and stuff, an' I remembered the big guy here, so yanno. Put two and two together, aaand here we are! I'm only here 'cause of her kooky little hyperfixation, really."

"It's not kooky! You're kooky," Maya hit back with a firm passion, folding her arms and pouting.

The babysitter, who sure was along the lines of 'kooky', rolled her eyes; "Psh! No I'm not."

All in all the spontaneous back-and-forth was all in good spirits, and Loona didn't take it to heart. She did however notice the tell-all solemn, serious look in Father Aleksander's eyes when she turned back to him. It was an expecting look, anticipating that about now was the time for their agreed catch-up. Yes, Loona had made up her mind that she would — reluctantly — catch up, but she wasn't sure if she was actually prepared for it. There was so much to talk about, yet so little she could actually reveal. Luckily for her, Loona was good at keeping secrets.

In turn Loona gave a knowing but troubled look back, telling the old Russian all that he needed to know. It was now or never. Breaking the ice a little, Loona cleared her throat; "So yeah, have you got, like, anything sorta related to this? Anything at all."

A second was paid to thought, then paying off when Father Aleksander returned with a sudden look of realisation. "We do! Now that you mention it," he claimed; "It's in the hall! You could call it memorabilia, but the rare kind. Evgeniy will set it up, yes Evgeniy?"

The only reply Evgeniy gave was an affirmative but quiet nod, his mouth formed into a faint, close-lipped smile.

Now the ball was in Loona's park. She tapped Maya gently on the arm; "Kid, listen. Old dude here and I gotta talk for a little bit in private. Is that okay?"

"But can't I wait here," was Maya's pleading-eyed reply.

Loona shook her head, and she kneeled down to the girl's eye-level; "It's kinda important, sorry kid. I won't be long, don't worry! Go wait with that guy there, he'll watch out for ya. He did for me."

At first Maya was indecisive, wanting to stay and eavesdrop into whatever fabled conversation her babysitter was about to have. The private talks were always the most interesting in her mind. Eventually with enough thought, and the pleading serious look in Loona's eyes, Maya abided and began to walk off. As they walked off, Maya had already restarted her questions.

Watching the two walk off towards the old hall of neo-classical architecture, Loona braced herself for what was to come on her end.

"You know I don't really wanna do this, right," Loona asked drearily in a sigh, forcing herself to commit to the inevitable talk. She could feel her breath tightening.

"Yes. Yes, I do," Father Aleksander nodded solemnly, trodding slowly towards the bench under the oak tree. The clearly reluctant gothic young adult trudged alongside him, her knees weakening. Clasping his hands behind his back, the old man informed; "Father Andrei told me about your reluctance to catch up, and that's okay! But it's up to you if you want to do this today or not, we don't have to."

Loona thought quietly for a few steps more. It was when she finally reached the lonesome wood and iron bench did she finally open up; "But I do, I have to! At least I feel like I need to. It's like… I feel like if I do this right now, I'll somehow feel better about the whole thing. That happened…"

Stiffly Father Aleksander sat down, making himself comfortable; "So what happened?"

Also having just sat down, Loona paused dramatically and gazed out into the world around her, out into nothing in particular. Out of all the questions the elderly man could've asked, he asked the

hardest and most confronting of all from the get-go. “Can I, um, not really answer that,” the troubled woman meekly requested; “Is that an option?”

Father Aleksander nodded slowly, silently smiling in assurance that it indeed was.

There was much comfort to find in this freedom of speaking. Loona let out a smile that dissipated as quick as it appeared, and again she began to think. What exactly was there to talk about? There were ample answers to this, but only a select few correct ones. But where exactly to start?

Soon Loona figured out from where to start; “You ever feel like you’re the only person really suffering?”

“In what way,” asked the old Priest. He coaxed gently and without confrontation, in spite of the claim being a rather bold one to make.

Loona leant forward in the bench, using her arms resting slack across her knees as support. “In every way,” she said plainly, and she drew a heavy breath. A sad, ironic smile devoid of joy spread across her black-lipstick lips; “I’ve lost everything, man. My home, my friends. My dad… Shit, all I got left is a photo of me and him the day he adopted me. Heh, ’S not a good photo either, I look like I don’t wanna be there! I didn’t. Obviously I don’t feel that way now.”

“So when you say you lost them,” Father Aleksander momentarily interjected, trying to understand her meaning; “You don’t mean…”

Immediately Loona knew what he was insinuating. She elaborated in earnest; “No no, I don’t think so. I hope not. … Something happened. It was big, aand.. well now they don’t want me around anymore. But— huh— how the hell was I supposed to know that coming around here would get me into so much deep shit? I was just curious and wanted to have a look, how is that a crime?!”

“A crime to who,” was Father Aleksander’s question, as he seemed genuinely perplexed.

“The people who booted me out, apparently!” Loona threw her hands up in the air then let them fall to her sides, slumping her back against the backrest like her energy had been expunged. The young woman looked utterly defeated, and she felt as much if not tenfold. With a dim and disheartened

look, Loona glanced at the old spiritual man; “Why didn’t you turn me away when you first saw me?”

“Because I don’t do that,” Father Aleksander affirmed, sounding serious but assuring. He stared back into the unfortunate goth’s glance to hone in the point; “The people that need to be heard, need to be heard. Those who come for help with genuine intent, will get help. And those who want to have a look, will indeed have a look.”

Loona shook her head in a way that heavily suggested confusion; “How do I fit in any of that criteria though? Like c’mon, I came out of nowhere and started poking around like an idiot. And it’s not like I fit in at all, I mean look at me!”

“Are you looking for help,” was the question Father Aleksander put forth in that very second. The way it was phrased suggested that he already knew the answer.

“Well– I mean,” Loona staggered, the question throwing her off a good amount; “Like— Tha– That’s why I’m here, right? That’s why I’m talking to you, pretty much.”

The smile that the old Priest had grew that little bit wider when it reemerged, brimming with the essence of knowing. “I needn’t add much else,” the old man added humbly, and it now his turn to gaze out momentarily into the world around him, full of appreciation of the whole thing.

But he also recognised its iniquities; “The world is full of suffering, it really is. It’s full of vanity, egotism, malice, deceit. Even allergy to truth. There’s a lot of it, and that in turn is the reason for much of the world’s suffering. Pride, arrogance, greed… lies. The world’s suffering pools onto us, and that is the reason why people suffer. But what people do about their suffering, that is what matters.”

Just then Father Aleksander turned his head somewhere to the left of him, towards the ground. He pointed to the spot; “Look there. What do you see?”

Loona shifted her attention to the gestured spot, and saw in no time at all, a sparrow in the grass. In fact it was one of the very same sparrows Loona had seen earlier, she could tell by the unique brown-and-white patterns on its tiny wings. It hopped along on the ground, poking and prodding frequently into the grass in its twitching movements, obviously hunting for food.

For a quiet second Loona squinted at it, then said; “A bird.” She didn’t know where this was going.

Slowly and with a maintained smile Father Aleksander nodded; “Good, very good. Now tell me, do you think that bird there has suffered?”

“What,” Loona snorted, looking back at the old man with a scrunched nose; “I don’t, no. Don’t you dare tell me that what I’ve been through is comparable to that thing’s life. Don’t you dare, dude!”

But Father Aleksander calmly persisted. He pointed up to the sky; “But what about the threat of hawks? You see them frequently out here, circling above. That sparrow there has to watch out for them always, to be aware to stay alive. And what of illness? Of finding food? Aren’t these all sufferings in a way, uncertainties?”

Loona opened her mouth to bark off, but caught herself and paused. She gave it a genuine thought, eyes twitching with deep contemplation; “Well, yeah. But it’s not like it’s been kicked out and severed from its family!”

“Ah! But you don’t know that, do you,” the elder interjected; “You don’t know if at some point, when it was a hatchling, that a hawk came along and hunted its mother! And say that this is the truth, that this did happen to that sparrow — you don’t see it letting that suffering define it, do you? It lives. And it lives in rebellion of that suffering.”

The analogy didn’t make too much sense. Again it felt like the comparison was almost mocking her situation, but at the same time Loona could see the point being made. It raised a question, in which she asked; “So I should just keep on living like nothing’s happened. Is that what you’re saying?”

Father Aleksander flicked his hand away. “No no. I don’t mean that,” he affirmatively elaborated, shifting his posture as he explained. “See here,” he started again, pointing to the hungry house sparrow; “That sparrow lives because of its will to live. You have that same will, as is the reason why you haven’t given up. Of course remember what has happened, you have a right to — but do not let those sufferings define you. Be on the contrary of that bad nature, and rebel against it.”

All of this, this informal lecture, was quite a bit to take in. Loona sat there and let it all settle in, deciding on what exactly to do with it. It was an epiphany to be sure, great advice even. But how would she apply all of it, was she capable? Loona thought she was, thus far — so far so good.

Right as she began mulling over the advice, Loona noticed Father Aleksander heaving himself back up onto his feet, dusting off his cassock as he did so. She too got up shortly after, following him when he beckoned for her to come along. They were heading in a straight line to the hall.

“Nobody is without suffering,” the elderly father continued; “And no suffering is greater or smaller than the other. Keep comfort in the fact that you have found the will to continue. Those who have afflicted you will be angry at that, for sure.”

“Are they ever,” Loona muttered to herself, and for the briefest of seconds, a vague smile crept up her lips. She loved it, the idea of continuing in spite of all that was thrown at her. Defiance manifest.

The first thing that hit Loona was just how dim the hall was. She had just walked right in, and with exception to the lights above that had been turned down to a minimum, the entire interior looked remarkably dark with the maroon curtains drawn tight on either side.

What’s more, the room was almost entirely empty, save for a few chairs set up in a row of four, and a tall, incredibly antique film projector set up right behind; the lens point-blank towards the back wall of the stage. The vintage projector looked to have had some modifications too, most likely to allow for hands-free cranking of the film reel. On the stage was a wide white film screen, set up on a stand much like the century-old novelty on the main floor.

Sitting patiently on the chair to the centre-left was Maya’s silhouette, while standing up fiddling with the projector was the younger Russian from earlier. His hands worked meticulously with the film reel that had been holstered on the machine, trying his hardest not to damage the film which he inspected with ample attention. One wrong move, and decades of history would be lost.

With a casual stride, Father Aleksander shuffled up beside the busy parishioner; “How’s it looking, Evgeniy? All ready to go,” he asked with anticipation.

Meanwhile Loona had her own priorities, meeting back up with little Maya who had made herself home on her own respective seat. In a quiet, reserved way, Loona pulled up the free chair to the far left, sitting right beside the pint-sized responsibility. “Heya, I’m back,” she whispered over to Maya, offering to her a little smile.

The way Maya's face lit up was priceless. "Loona! You're here," she harshly whispered back like she celebrated it; "Did you talk about what you needed to?"

"Yeah yeah, I did," Loona said casually, still thinking about what had been discussed. She folded her arms and sunk into the metal folding chair, getting as comfortable as she possibly could "Just gotta think it through now. I'll get there, I'll be fine."

Maya tilted her head a little; "You think so?"

"You think so" played on Loona's mind the second after it was uttered. Though only asked innocently, it did make the disguised hound think; did she really think so?

"I know so," Loona finally answered, giving off a smile to bring home her belief. She hoped so.

Then broke in Father Aleksander, shattering any and all hushness. "Okay! We're ready," he beamed, trodding lightly over to the short row of chairs and sitting down. He gave a vague rundown of what was to come; "You'll see soon why I called this 'rare' earlier — it's exceedingly so! It's only one of a handful of reels left in the world of its age, of which it is one-hundred-and-ten years old, to the year."

Loona began to put the pieces together, perhaps prematurely; "So what, it's just an old-timey film," she asked, twisting herself around to glance back at the ancient mechanism. The Priest's assistant for the day, Evgeniy, looked to be making some final adjustments.

"It is, yes," Father Aleksander nodded along; "But not in the fictional way! This is a newsreel, one of the first to be produced of its kind. They'd show these in theatres back in the day, usually around ten to fifteen minutes long of whatever would be happening around the nation. The first ever was made in Britain, then Germany, United States, France… then finally made its way to Russia around… uff, I'd say, mid-nineteen-hundreds? Nineteen-oh-five, around then."

The Priest waved to the big, bulky mechanism behind both Loona and her sidekick; "This one was brought along with Admiral Georgiy Stark's Vladivostok Flotilla, when they evacuated. Went its way to California, then in the seventies found its way here. The film projector was one I bought, got it from somewhere in Tasmania years ago."

At this point Loona would be lying to herself if she claimed she wasn't at all interested, her anticipation steadily rising. But it was nothing compared to Maya, who looked like she had all the knowledge in the world beheld before her eyes. Still, the undercover hellhound waited patiently — this could be good. It better be.

Soon enough this much awaited anticipation paid off. Father Aleksander sat down to the furthest right seat, and called at once for the designated projector-man to get the ball rolling. With that, a chain reaction; a sudden magnified light from a bulb shone widely onto the film screen on stage, followed closely by the first distinct clicks of a projector winding up. These clicks quickened, more and more joining the cacophony until a steady, constant rhythm set foot. The film began to play.

At first there was just a blank, dark gray screen, the first dozen or so frames of the moving picture show evidently left vacant — but this wasn't for long. Quickly fading in after a good few seconds was the depiction of a large double-headed eagle, its broadened wings spread out to either side, and both heads wearing crowns facing either direction; one giant crown with flowing banners hovered over both sentient heads. The winged beast held a scepter and orb in its tight-gripped talons, left and right respectively, an assertion of the authority the great avian withheld. A coat of arms was displayed on its feathered chest, depicting a knight on horseback slaying a dragon beneath the horse's thrashing hooves.

Underneath the giant eagle appeared large, bold text, framed in a banner of its own:
"Императорский институт русских новостей — Май 1913 г."

In a flash both text and double-headed avian disappeared, replaced in a split second with a more comprehensive message: **"Два дня назад в Санкт-Петербурге состоялось Королевское шествие! Это ознаменовало успех недавней военной подготовки новобранцев."**

This message too snapped away, in an instant making way for quite the ever-intriguing scene. Now the true black-and-whiteness of the decades-old film could be appreciated, as on the large wide screen was now a procession through a city street. The procession was slow; a shuffling, linear procession of many figures, that of men with full beards in priestly garments. And there were many of them; clergyman after clergyman, waltzing on by with crowds to either side of them. Some were young with shorter beards and uniform heads of hair, others were old and with long white facial hair, and hair on their heads to match.

Seeing this made Loona give a glance to Father Aleksander across the way, the film showing men who looked almost exactly like him giving him the feeling of a spirit from that bygone age. He might as well have been.

Then came a faint little gasp from Loona's right, obviously from Maya. She looked down to see what was wrong, but the kid was staring straight ahead, fixated right at the projection, eyes flickering with wonder.

What the girl had gasped at wasn't a mystery to Loona for long, when she saw what was coming up. There was a gap in the procession, the line of clergymen having just finished, and coming forward was a new line — way less clerical, and way more aristocratic. In front was a man Loona almost instantly recognised, from his sash-donned, medal-sporting regal military uniform, to his ever distinct bearded appearance. Turns out the statue outside was scarily accurate, down to the look in his commanding, overseeing eyes. He walked side by side with what was evidently his wife, arms locked together as they walked in step with each other down the bricked pathway.

Part-time artist and part-time babysitter Loona had seen his brass effigy and sketched him, but seeing the real him move was a whole other experience. It was surreal if anything. She checked on the rest of the audience; Maya was absolutely absorbed, Evgeniy the cameraman had come to join them, and Father Aleksander — he looked melancholic. Not overwhelmingly so, but enough for it to be noticeable.

Loona propped her brow up at this, and she leant forwards in her seat. "What's up," she found herself asking. She didn't know why she did, but it happened.

Father Aleksander paid the gothic lady a glance, and opened his mouth to speak. "It wasn't perfection," he began in deep reflection, slowly shaking his head; "But it was miles better than what was to come. I'm sure a lot of people back home feel the same way, in hindsight. Even immediately after the civil war. That's why so many left."

"Wha- What do you mean," Loona asked in a hushed tone, out of the loop as to what he was referring to.

He didn't reply right away, instead facing the screen again. Loona did the same, watching as another message on a black background popped up: **"Пятый Доно-Кубанский казачий полк, смотр Его Величества!"**

The message hadn't been up five seconds until it cut away again, just like its predecessors. A long line of uniformed men now occupied the screen. They all stood tall and steadfast with rifles firmly in the 'shoulder arms' position, their service caps perched at an angle atop their heads. Every part of the formation of young, able-bodied men was as tight-postured as physically possible, and not one moved.

Into frame came the same certain man from seconds earlier, his head now donned with a peaked visor cap, and his arm crooked up into a stalwart salute. Soon as he entered into frame, all the heads of the soldiers snapped towards him in perfect unison — all eyes to their Tsar. Accompanying the Regal man was what was evidently the soldiers' commanding officer, his moustache white and long, and finished up at the ends into a curve. The officer walked alongside his bearded sovereign, as well saluting the sons of the motherland who were ready to serve.

Loona would be focusing more on the film being shown, if not for the string of statements the Priest had made just earlier. She whispered to him again, behind Maya's head; "What are ya talking about, who left? What came?"

Father Aleksander leant back too, facing Loona to fill her in. "There was a war. A Civil War as I've told you before," he began; "For five years that war lasted, and before then there was The Great War. But before all that, before all that death, this was the world."

The head of the eastern realm's armies closely inspected every minute detail, stopping at one point to greet a particularly tall and slim soldier at the end of the line. Other than the head of the armies, the infantryman's presence too was imposing and prominent.

"It's remarkable," Father Aleksander said in a melancholic form, crossing his arms as he gazed into nowhere in particular. He sniffed subconsciously and said, rubbing the ridge of his nose; "You know, I was reading a memoir from a man named Artyom Zacharevko not too long ago. He was a former KGB operative who became disillusioned after the fall of the Soviet Union. He came to see the Soviet State for what it was, how it covered up some of its less appealing secrets, in favour of stories of 'Avant-Garde' heroism and the 'unity' of the people — *"Our goal is the happiness of all mankind."* Anyway, one of these things he revealed was something rather interesting."

The priest, freeing one hand out from his folded arms, pointed to the Monarch still featured on the screen. "It was about what happened to him. Half a dozen men were assigned to… well, you can imagine how certain revolutions go. But all of them who did it, in that basement of Ipatiev House, who had the guns that July day — they were so unimaginably drunk, that it was a miracle that any of them remained alive. According to Zacharevko, from what he read from these declassified files, the alcohol they consumed beforehand was like nothing found on Earth. By all logic, the sheer level of intoxication would've killed them almost instantly. But it didn't. Nobody other than the Ural Soviet that day knew where it came from, and even they were dazzled by its strength and origins. They were like puppets, doing some sort of bidding."

Almost like he was purposefully being dramatic, Father Aleksander paused and silently watched the projected film nearing its end. The bearded statesman still featured supremely. He then uttered, quietly but with conviction; “It’s all very strange the whole thing. Very strange.”

Adventure For Beginners (Pt. I)

February, 1919 — 1 Dean Trench Street, London. Encounter plus twenty-five days.

Captain Boswell, now officially ‘Sir’ William Hughes Boswell as of the day before, disliked London even on a good day. He hated it a thousand-fold when winter seemed to hang around like a bad smell, despite it being the beginning of Spring. Today was one of those latter, utterly off-putting days. Oh how he would kill to be back up north, in his home county of Yorkshire — the weather wasn’t any better, but at least it was familiar.

Boswell could feel the warmth of the fireplace already when he arrived at the doorstep of ‘1 Dean Trench Street’ — the residence of an old friend. He looked to the left and right of him, down the wintry London streets mostly deserted, as was usual for that time of morning on a Sunday. He wasn’t sure why he had checked his surroundings, maybe out of necessity or paranoia. The feeling he was being watched was far too prominent to be outright dismissed.

Wasting no more time, he knocked on the door. “Winston? Winston Sir, are you home,” Boswell called out, hoping for an answer.

For enough time for Boswell to think there was no one home, there was stillness beyond the door. Until finally, without warning, the lock shifted and the door cracked ajar with a firm jolt. Boswell couldn’t see much through the thin slither of clearance, but he could see a portion of a clean-shaven face staring right back at him, peering through the clearing. He looked displeased.

The face spoke; “And to what displeasure do I have you at my door,” he grumbled, his mouth contorted into a pronounced frown.

Boswell sighed; “No displeasure, you great oaf, just here on the meeting we agreed on. Don’t you remember, or are you too drunk already?”

The face beyond the door scowled harder; “Your Northern crassness will be your end, good Sir. I have not heard such disrespect in my life!”

“Yes Sir, and your cheek will be yours,” Boswell snapped, his voice cutting through the sulky London air.

Souring moods looked to prevail when the face maintained his sneer. But then the tension took a dramatic turn for the better, the man’s face brightening into a wide, close-lipped smirk at the very last second. He began to chuckle humorously; “Still sharp as a tack, good Boswell Sir,” he beamed, and with all feigned veneers of “hostility” out of the way finally pulled the door wide open.

There stood in his residence one Winston Churchill dressed in his maroon robe, very recently appointed ‘Secretary of State for War and Air’, and the latest boisterous chapter of the Spencer-Churchill Aristocracy. Standing before him in a civilian’s black coat and tailored suit was one Sir Captain William Hughes Boswell, a direct descendant of Yorkshire Aristocracy dating as far back to the reign of Henry the Fifth.

The ‘House of Boswell’ and the ‘House of Spencer-Churchill’ had become well acquainted over the decades following the Napoleonic Wars — an unofficial, unbroken, continuous camaraderie that had now lasted well over a Century. Captain Boswell’s cordial connections with this outgoing manifestation of the Spencer-Churchills was only a faithful continuation of this, with first correspondence going as far back as the immediate aftermath of the Second Boer War. In truth, the irony was that war brought these two together — a brotherhood amidst all the smoke of conflict.

Churchill led his latest houseguest inside and shut the door behind them. “And so as Odysseus had achieved, you’ve returned from the underworld,” he proclaimed, speaking in that passionately poetic tongue of his. It was here that he formally invited Captain Boswell into the warm sanctuary of ‘1 Dean Trench Street’.

“Oh I wouldn’t call it the underworld as such, Winston,” Boswell corrected with a faint dreariness to his voice, following his escort up the stairs to the study; “Just a spot of mainland European bother, as it goes with the East. But it is… yes it is exceptionally difficult, I would say.”

“As I have heard,” Churchill muttered, climbing his way up the stairs ahead in a freshly-awoken trudge; “All these reports of losses, stagnation, logistical difficulties. They haven’t ceased since I’ve taken this post.”

“You seem to be one of the few in government taking the relief force seriously anymore,” Boswell remarked in hope it was still the case, in short time reaching the top of the stairs to the third floor.

“Yes. That I feel I am,” proclaimed Churchill with a tinge of frustration. He reached for the smart wooden door leading into the study, and opened it to head inside; “Westminster is exhausted from the last five years, and I do not for a moment blame them. But they don’t see the deadly danger to the people of East Europe, I’ve tried warning them time and time again! There’s a reason we’ve committed fourteen-thousand men to North Russia in the first place.”

In a courteous move, the newly-minted Secretary of State poured himself and his houseguest a serving of scotch. “From what I understand,” Churchill ranted, setting the bottle of scotch aside on an expensive side table; “The Prime Minister seems to be under the naive assumption that the Bolshevists will stop at the border of East Poland. We both know this is a delusional hope.”

“So it goes,” Boswell regrettably agreed, sitting within an armchair upon being invited to. He looked into the rich-brown murky scotch.

“They will not stop at Poland, or in Poland if Warsaw is to fall,” Churchill continued on, also sitting down; “Nor in Finland, Germany still in humility, the Danube, or the Balkans. They will push to France, the Benelux, and into Iberia until the entire continent is conquered! You must’ve already heard the stories, I’m certain you have — mass executions, robberies, and looting by Lenin’s hordes. This is the deadly danger I speak of, Boswell Sir. We must address it accordingly.”

“Of course we must, but with us and what army,” Boswell interjected, speaking metaphorically; “As you said the government is growing tired of holding North Russia. And without any form of advance or victory to show for our numbers, we’re sending men over there as sitting ducks!”

“No. Not sitting ducks, Sir,” affirmed the Spencer-Churchill descendant with stern eyes, using his index finger on his scotch-wielding hand to point; “Only stagnant men without the means. They can and will fight, I am sure of this as are you. All that is needed is the will of the high command, the logistical means, and the utmost proper planning. No shortcuts, Boswell Sir! Never-… Nuh-Nevermore.”

The dramatic shift on Churchill’s part from ranting to repentful silence staggered Boswell who witnessed it. He knew better than to question it however — the failure of the Gallipoli Campaign had quickly become the Secretary of State’s lingering burden. It haunted him.

Setting aside his own deeply-rooted personal ghosts, Churchill pressed on like the soldier he was — there was no time to be haunted. He relearned the ability to speak with some teething trouble; “An-… And what of the news, Sir? About the Frenchman.”

This was the news Captain Boswell didn't want to deliver. But as was his duty, he delivered it regardless; "He's dead, Winston."

"Dead?"

"I received the news yesterday from France, just before noon. Some point in the night he managed to jump, fell three storeys."

Churchill couldn't believe it, and the look on his face said as much, if not a hundred-fold; "Well-… I, what-… The-Then where the hell were the men guarding him! They couldn't have just let the man jump like that, not without proper supervision!"

"Winston, they couldn't do anything for him," Boswell piped up before Churchill could blither onwards; "The French Army assured frequent routine checkups would be provided, and they were doing just that! These things—… They shouldn't happen. They shouldn't happen, but they do! And I can assure you, Winston, whatever happened to that poor man in North Russia was beyond extraordinary. I saw him face-to-face when he got off the Thunderclad in Tilbury, there was something eerily fae about him! I really believe there wasn't anything we could-… that we could do."

There was nothing else to be said — the Frenchman, one Édouard Dumont, had jumped. That was the cruel reality, and that was the son of France's fate. Whatever he had seen, something with *"Yeux de couleur — eyes of colour,"* had taken him too far. There was no hope for him to return.

Churchill, in a flicker of grief and disbelief, sank back into his armchair. "Insanity, William," he conceded, running his free hand through his thinning copper-brown hair; "That is what sort of conflict this is. Has been since it started."

"Which is why I'm here, Winston," was Captain Boswell's response.

Churchill, taking another sip of his slightly below room temperature scotch, looked up; "Is that so?"

Boswell's answer was resolute; "Yes. I was informed yesterday by His Majesty The King that he wants me to return to North Russia, and this I will do. But it was his instruction as well that I brought you along."

"His Majesty. … He wants me to head for North Russia," pondered Churchill with a faraway gaze, taking a sip of his scotch; "Mm. Is that so, or just a trick by the high command to humiliate me further?"

"Winston, how long have we known each other? I have no intention to trick you, man, don't even suggest that to yourself," Boswell tried in earnest to assure.

He leant forward in his chair, having not touched a single drop of his drink which he now set aside; "This is serious — His Majesty The King is serious about this. This is your chance, Winston, to be actively involved as you've always wanted to be! Lloyd George and the cabinet ministers might not be as enthusiastic anymore, yes, but His Majesty and myself remain so. Please Winston, we share your concerns, and then some! We need you for this."

Seeing the utter sincerity thrust forward from Boswell's being made Churchill reconsider his reluctance. The Dardanelles had eliminated a great deal of trust the adventurous Spencer-Churchill had in the high command, or for any direction given from them — the way they threw him under stuck with him, and it would remain that way.

But this wasn't from the high command, no. This was beyond them — a direction by the will of His Majesty, George the Fifth, put squarely at his feet alongside one Captain William Hughes Boswell. If he were to commit to this undertaking, under his command, it would be the first proper action he would've seen in a while. Perhaps it could be his only chance to prove to the high command he wasn't some outlying 'weakling' failure — the Dardanelles disaster would not define him.

Winston had a decision to make. Almost out of instinct, he craned his neck up towards a portrait, hanging next to the large bay window of the third floor. The portrait was the likeness of the 'First Duke of Marlborough' — John Churchill.

Embroidered in a suit of armour and a loose red robe over that, old John Churchill stared back at his recently disgraced descendant. He expected the forty-five year old Winston Churchill to be decisive, as he was two centuries ago.

Looking away towards the floor as though he were unworthy, Winston murmured; “If His Majesty requires my service… Then my hands, William, are forced to action.”

Elated was Boswell to hear this, but he did not show it too outwardly. After at last taking a swig of the glass set aside, he outlined what was to happen; “Alright. So His Majesty instructed me, very emphatically, that this is to be an independent task force. The high command will have minimal say in the operations, that means no commentary from General Ironside or Poole.”

“And what exactly are we doing here, Sir,” queried Churchill in due time. He would not allow any major details to fall between the cracks.

“Well see, it’s-… We’re-…” It was at this point that Boswell became suddenly hesitant. The details were going to be slightly unbelievable, impractical even with the resources used. Maybe even a waste.

Subconsciously looking around him in some form of nervous twitch, the Captain leant in closer and half-whispered; “Well you’ve seen the reports, haven’t you? Missing French personnel, the mangled corpses of our own men, things seen in the wilderness. It’s His Majesty’s direction that we

sail from Archangelsk and go eastward along the coast. We want to see what we can find, if there's any clue as to what is happening here, whatever this is."

Churchill paused and focused on one key detail; "Sail? Why not advance inland?"

"Then we'll have the full attention of Ironside and Poole," Boswell pointed out; "We'll have the Royal Navy watching us, yes, but they seem more interested in being involved in this than the land forces. I've spoken to them personally, yesterday in fact. His Majesty has assured them that it is his will as well. They've agreed to loan the HMS Thunderclad to us, to get this done."

"The Thunderclad, she's a pre-Dreadnought relic," Churchill rubbished at the apparent choice of vessel; "Experimental in her design as well, mind you! We don't have time for second thought vessels, let alone experimental ones trudging along the coast! Besides, she's an open sea vessel, not a coastal patrol boat."

Fully aware of the obvious logistical problems, Boswell said; "Afraid we're left with no other choice, Winston. The Thunderclad's all they can spare, they made that quite clear to me. If you're concerned about the water depth, I've been told the waters in North Russia are quite deep. This includes the waters five-hundred yards before the coastline, which is as close as we're permitted to patrol."

"Typical," Churchill wheezed and got up from his chair, signalling for Boswell to hurryingly follow suit; "Is this all the Royal Navy does? Provide us inadequate ships unsuited for the task they put them up for? Then I, solely, get the sodding blame when it inevitably goes belly-up because of decisions *they* make."

In a swift amble Churchill made his way out of the study and into the next room. "But," he enthusiastically conceded despite his reservations; "The Empire does not flag or falter, and neither will I until we get this done. Whatever we're doing here."

Inside this smaller room full of books, tomes and other miscellaneous articles was a neatly organised arrangement of maps. Some of these maps were of entire nation states, while others were of more local and concentrated areas, half of which Boswell recognised to be of British Counties. Sectioned off, as though recently used, were maps of Eastern Europe, showing the pre-Great War borders of Germany, the Austrian and Hungarian Kingdoms, and of course the largest of the three — the Russian Empire.

Churchill's hands got busy rummaging around the maps of East Europe. When he found the one he was looking for, he threw it on top of all the collection and splayed it out flat. Jabbing a finger into the paper, Churchill proclaimed; "Here, we'll take this with us. A complete map of North-Western Russia, from Murmansk as shown here, to as far west as over here, in Naryan-Mar."

Boswell scratched his chin and analysed the map to an intense degree. "Right, right," he mumbled, pondering over every little ink-printed detail translated to English. It was his turn to point at the map, somewhere at the widest northern point of the White Sea; "I've been told there's a settlement around here. A small coastal merchant city called Belaya-Bukhta, and the only way to get there is by ship."

To familiarise himself with this newfound information, Churchill paid closer attention to the map's finer details. Sure enough there was a minuscule, easily missable label with a dot, marked in a specific west-facing spot of the Kanin Peninsula — ***'Belaya-Bukhta'***, the fine black dot was so labelled. From the looks of things which Churchill himself didn't even notice at first, despite owning the article, the label for the seaside settlement of 'Belaya-Bukhta' appeared to have been added as an afterthought by the publisher. Either that, or a later addition due to its apparent easily forgettable insignificance.

Mildly puzzled by the newly discovered existence of the settlement, Churchill queried; "And to what significance is this town?"

For a second Boswell pondered, staring intently at the mapped location and surroundings. Brushing his moustache with one hand, the Northern Englishman suggested; "Well who knows. Maybe that town has the answer."

The feeling of being watched returned at once.

Adventure For Beginners (Pt. II)

<u>One Day Later.</u>

Churchill paced slowly around the heated room beside the fireplace, going back and forth from the leftmost corner to its rightmost counterpart, hands clasped behind his back to prevent them from fidgeting. Many plans whirled around in his head, on how to execute this operation with maximum success rate and with as little to no casualties as possible. Numerous factors haunted him — the weather, logistics, threats of revolutionary patrols catching wind of the massive British ship sailing off the coast. Anything that could be against them, was apparently so. It was like the Dardanelles all over again.

The room which Winston occupied was one at Wellington Barracks, right in the heart of London. It was Boswell's firm-handed negotiating that gave them this spare room in the first place, and he as of that very moment was busy making preparations. First and foremost, the 'Thunderclad Expedition' needed men — bold and audacious, ambitious and fierce. Cunning men who were experienced in some way is what was required, but where to find them was the first major hurdle — this was 'Sir' Captain Boswell's job.

But there was another matter that weighed on Winston Churchill's already busy mind — he had just read the French report on the late Private Édouard Dumont, the lone survivor of the missing North Russian French Platoon. According to the report, Private Dumont was found to be mostly mute. The ability to speak had been sapped from him for the most part, save for the odd breathless word, and his dissociative and glassy-eyed demeanor was unlike his usual self. It was exactly like Captain Boswell had claimed — there was something fae about him.

Although he almost never spoke post-repatriation, in the final hours of his life he was able to communicate. Not in words, but in the things he produced. In a last ditch effort to get him to "speak" in some form, the 'Hôtel Dieu' Hospital in Paris had provided for his means a notebook and pencil. The hope for Private Dumont to speak was faint, but it turned out to not be in vain.

At seven in the evening sharp, when a nurse returned to Dumont's room, he found that at some point he had begun intensely scribbling in the notebook. But these scribbles weren't the incoherent chicken scratches of a madman, but something else entirely — hieroglyphs, patterns, encryptions, all authored around a series of circles encased into one another, swirling in and around the central point like a spiral. But even then the patterns were of no traditional spiral, instead a network of branches going this way and that, interconnecting with patterns elsewhere around the circular main structure. It didn't make any sense, at least to the sane mind.

Also intertwined in the circular structure weren't just circles alone, but also a series of hexagonal patterns connected in a continuous, vaguely circular pattern stretching all the way around. These details were apparently so worth mentioning, that an entire paragraph was dedicated to the analysis of them. According to the author of the French report, one Captaine Francis Blanchet, it reminded him of the unique way honeycombs are interwoven with one another upon the host surface of a beehive. There was one particular word Captaine Blanchet described the findings — 'insect-like'.

The only door to the room opened without warning, revealing Boswell who had just arrived back. Today he was sporting his usual khaki military attire, cap and all.

"Things are moving quickly now, Winston! Very quickly," Sir Captain Boswell announced with a spring in his tempo, shutting the door behind him. He sounded almost excited; "And! I just received interesting news from the East."

The last part in particular caught Churchill's attention, who ceased his pacing at once and pivoted on his heels; "Which is?"

"I received correspondence from the Don-Kuban front, to the South," said Boswell, heading for the long wooden table in the centre of the room; "From a General Baron Wrangel. He's been made aware of what we're doing somehow, not sure how or who told him. Either way, he's offering some form of support."

The news, though unexpected, was at least welcome. The welcoming aspect aside, the pressing question based in reality had to be asked. "And of what help is someone that far south," Churchill pressed with valid reasoning to question so.

"Twenty sailors, and five hundred spare rifles," was the surprise sum Boswell gave; "It isn't much, but the gesture of course is appreciated. They'll all be sent to us in the course of time, in fact it's being organised by his men as we speak. We should expect them to arrive in the next week or so."

"The next week or so," Churchill repeated as a question first, but quickly figured out that the timeframes didn't align; "That's far too late, we're scheduled to leave in the next three days!"

"Which is exactly my concern," said Boswell in agreement, sliding a document from his uniform's tunic and onto the desk; "Besides, they need the weapons more than us. We have industry at our disposal, they unfortunately do not have such leisures. Still, General Wrangel seems adamant that we accept his offer — but on one condition."

Churchill half expected this. “There’s always a ‘but’, isn’t there,” he grumbled, expecting something somewhat outrageous; “And this is?”

“That whatever we find is then delivered directly to him. If those means are impossible however, the next possible recipient should be Admiral Kolchak,” Boswell relayed with affirmation in the instruction. But he wasn’t done yet, now drawing attention to the document he had brought in; “Also! I can say with confidence that we might’ve found our men. It’s a little rag-tag, but professional soldiers of the King nonetheless.”

As he was told these things, Churchill meanwhile paid his due attention to the list of names authored in formal handwriting. The ten-strong list wasn’t huge, in fact it was barely enough to form a platoon. But considering just how independent the operation was to be from the British High Command, it was the best that Boswell could achieve.

“And I trust these men are just outside, waiting for us,” Churchill went on to ask. The corner of his eyes caught attention of the door, half expecting the nearly dozen men listed to come right through on cue.

Turns out his assumption was correct.

The process began post haste. Time was running short.

“Name and rank,” was the command given across the table by the Spencer-Churchill, eyes focused on the list unfurled at his fingers.

“Private Douglas Whittle, Sir! Royal Yorkshire Regiment,” the first man to walk through the door sounded off, introducing himself outright.

According to the document, Private Whittle was a Northern English veteran of the Great War, having been stationed in the trenches guarding north of Paris three months before the end of the war. Proving himself to be a cunning fighter, Private Whittle went on to survive three battles — one

in defense against a German charge, and two counter-offensives. Ten Germans had fallen to his rounds.

Assessing the man of twenty-five years before him, Churchill examined his tall and slender appearance. Though he was thin, there was definitely considerable muscle definition in the way of his arms, most likely attributed to the difficult conditions of the last European war. His nose was more on the rectangular side, the nostrils not jutting out too confidently, giving it the overall appearance of a fleshy arrow. His mouth, underneath a clean-shaven lip with minimal shaving shadow, was a long thin line buttoned staunchly — he would not speak unless spoken to.

“Private Whittle,” Churchill uttered the soldier’s name, exhaling every syllable; “Are you willing to go into battle with us aboard a ship? In the cold hard north?”

“Whatever the cost may be, Sir,” Private Whittle answered confidently, and he knew of no fear. He remained standing there stalwartly like a statue, as if he were in front of the King himself.

Silently satisfied with his answer, Churchill nodded in approval to Boswell sitting beside him. He flicked his pen to mark a tick beside the private’s name — approved.

The process continued henceforth.

Churchill heartily cleared his throat; “Name and rank,” he ordered, fingers intertwined around a cigar.

The response was immediate; “Sir! Private Thomas Shoesmith, East Surrey Regiment.”

Private Shoesmith was a son of Somerset, and by extension a son to a lineage of dairy farmers nestled in the Mendip hills. A short statured man to be sure, but a sharpshooter nevertheless who had survived the latter six months of the last war. Around the same general fit physique of Private Whittle before him, Private Shoesmith however appeared that little bit less toned, looking particularly thin but not of the ill sort.

“Mister Shoesmith, Sir,” Churchill said, repeating the second arrival’s name; “You were stationed in Arras, weren’t you? Looking northwards to occupied Belgium when we advanced that October, into Lille. Records say you were there.”

“Yes Sir, that I was,” the seasoned Private Shoesmith affirmed, having experienced the battle firsthand and everything after; “It was very hard fought for. The Germans left a right old mess.”

Churchill, having served on the Western Front himself, was impressed by this English specimen’s demeanour; “A privilege, Mister Shoesmith.”

“Oh I wouldn’t go that far, Sir,” said Private Shoesmith, perhaps out of veiled humour.

The independent force was now two heads strong.

A cigar each now smouldered in between the two personnel’s fingers. While Boswell sat there and ran over each of the names, Churchill once again took the reins when the third man came in; “Sir! Name and rank.”

“Private Lewis Steele, Sir,” the Private introduced himself, a brown slouch hat held tightly by his side; “Seventh Australian Division, Royal Australian Engineers.”

“An Engineer! Yes, good Sir, we are needing of your expertise,” Churchill exclaimed, and he briefly returned his attention to Private Steele’s history. Something quite out of the ordinary caught his attention, and he promptly brought it forward; “And it also says here you have some experience in flying.”

The Private took a brief second to remember, and with little dithering explained; “Only a little, Sir. The war ended before I could go any further in my training.”

“But you trained as an aerial navigator, that’s what it reads here,” pointed Churchill; “That too will be of use.”

However this news came across to this otherwise ordinary ‘Private Steele’, he did not show it on his square-jawed face. Twitching his moustached lip to stifle a question he had proved futile, and he asked out of urge; “May I ask something, Sir? Only for a brief moment, about this operation.”

An exchange of looks between Boswell and Churchill occurred, then a nod. “You may,” nodded Churchill out of interest.

“Sir. If we’re going to be alone out there, on a warship largely unprotected, we need a contingency. What would that be, Sir?”

“We will have that sorted come departure,” Captain Boswell intervened; “There will be an explanation as to what those plans are. And no, there will be no half measures, we understand how risky this is.”

“Quite, Sir,” Private Steele nodded.

And then there were three.

The joint Boswell-Churchill expeditionary force built up, man after man, name after name. They came from everywhere — from Yorkshire, from Somerset, from Ulster, Glamorgan, and Dumfries and Galloway. From Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa. Truly a rag-tag arrangement, but undoubtedly a formidable force. Their names were as follows:

'Private Douglas Whittle'

'Private Thomas Shoesmith'

'Private Lewis Steele (Commonwealth of Australia)'

'Private Rhys Griffiths'

'Lance Corporal Donald McRoberts'

'Corporal Archie Barwick'

'Private Lachlan Davidson'

'Private Stanley Pherson (Dominion of Canada)'

'Private John Atwell (Dominion of New Zealand)'

'Private Frederik Jones (Union of South Africa)'

Each and every one of these men, these plucky few, all understood their duty. Whatever the great old East had in store for them, in whatever form that would manifest, they were ready.

An hour in that room, which in reality it all had been, felt more like an entire day had come and gone, the way that the process seemed to drag on. That was Captain Boswell's dramatised impression at least, though to him there was no hysteria to the feeling. Having removed himself from the room and out into the hallway, he leant on the windowsill looking out into the courtyard of Wellington Barracks. There was barely anyone outside, save for a few guards patrolling and the odd officer coming and going. Boswell didn't know what was worse — being over in North Russia, or the anticipation of going back.

"You appear lost, good fellow," Churchill observed. He too had just wandered out of the room, following up beside his Northern English comrade in the imperial force.

Churchill's judgment was correct. Furthermore, Sir Boswell seemed ever so far away, present but not of the world. One war had ended, and in the midst of that another had emerged. And now, for some reason unknown to any party with serious stakes, they were about to set sail to some unventured quadrant of desolate North Russia — all in the name of finding the unknown. But what was there to find that far East?

Turning away from the window, Boswell broke his silence; “What do you know about the far North? You’ve spent some time on the continent.” The faraway look in Boswell’s eyes, and his overall face in general, told of a deep yearning to know something, anything, about this venture of his.

The Secretary for War recognised this perceived longing, and tried the best he could. “Ah… There isn’t much to be known,” said Churchill, pondering the question; “Not in the far North. A few sparse settlements, forests vast and oppressive, ample snow and frost. Some of those settlements aren’t even connected by an established path, so the northern seas are the only way to get to and from.”

Boswell hummed mutely, and nodded along faintly. He has seen much if not all of what Churchill referred to. A part of him considered the word ‘ample’ an understatement.

“Belaya-Bukhta I haven’t heard much of,” the Secretary for War stated, pressing a steady resting hand up against the wall; “Didn’t even know it existed up until yesterday. I have asked around about it. Mostly it’s a fishing port with a population of about a thousand, maybe less. Apparently some of the populace there, half Russians half Finnish, are particularly superstitious.”

Replicating how Boswell was gazing out into the courtyard, Churchill did the same. He rambled on; “Stories of spirits, spectres, ghouls… things in the woods, out in the plains. Sounds, smells, all sorts of feelings. Being in a settlement so isolated, that far North, you do tend to become strange in the mind.”

Now Boswell had been listening up to a point. He was reminded of his own strange feelings, his own personal hauntings that had followed him since Archangelsk. He rapped his fingers in a fidget against the windowsill, and he drew a lead-weighted breath. Boswell confessed; “Someone’s been watching me, Winston.”

Just like that Churchill paused and glanced over. He asked the most appropriate question; “Who’s that?”

“She came to me when the Thunderclad came to port. She knew who I was, named my wife. Said she was very powerful.” As Boswell said this, he looked out beyond the courtyard of the barracks, out into the street. A black horse-drawn carriage rolled on by, vacant, hauled by a black horse with its driver at the reins. An all-familiar old London scene, but somehow strange.

“Did you ever catch her name,” Churchill pressed.

In truth, Boswell had not. That’s to say, at least not her real name.

Asclepius

The heavy scent of grease and refined oil, mighty in strength, seasoned the air with its unique flavour of mechanical odour. Making it worse was the fact this gigantic chasm, carved out from the dense rock of Hades, was just that — a chasm. Poorly drafting with a fresh air flow that proved worse than useless, effectively nonexistent.

All this and more thanks to the gargantuan mechanical marvel housed in this gigantic pit two-hundred feet deep — an elaborate, bulky industrial behemoth made of all sorts of hydraulics, valves, electrics, and massive cast iron pipes. It was impossible to see the centre structure of the thing, with all those networks of pipes and wires crossing this way and that, resembling a mechanical recreation of biological muscle and tissue.

In its own frightening right, the vast industrial colossus was alive. Breathing, heaving, shifting. Every stirring from the brutish thing sounded laborious. It was like it struggled with its own material.

The brains of the complex operation, none other than the mechanically-smart Asmodeus, prowled up to the observation deck of the mega-project. There sat an imp at the controls, meticulously monitoring the combined digital and analogue dials and indicators.

“Is everything in order, Herbin,” asked the imp’s cartoonishly large superior. The deep tone of the Sin’s voice sounded different than usual, plagued with the blatant underlying scent of stern determination, and an intolerance to difficulties.

“Seems to be so far, your lordship,” the middle-aged, slightly pot-bellied imp answered. He examined the dials left to right, relaying everything he knew as of current; “Uhh— Readings have remained stable, the hydraulics are no longer fluctuating in strength. Ohh, a… a few tweaks needed here and there, but otherwise we’re easygoing.”

The results were inconsistent, as was becoming usual with the elaborate construction dwarfing even the Sin of Lust himself. But it was the closest to perfection that they had gotten thus far, and with an ever-tightening schedule that day, he had no time to be particular. Reluctantly, Ozzie conceded; “Mm. Good, good. Keep it up.”

“Your lordship!” — A voice echoed through the giant chasm, briefly overcoming the underlying whirring of machinery.

Ozzie blinked and spun around, looking back down the iron staircase he had ascended a few short seconds ago. A sinner was ascending them now, dressed in a long black uniform coat and a peaked

cap, his face obscured by yellowing bandages and round glasses perched upon the outline of his nose, which covered his frighteningly bloodshot eyes.

The Sin's expression hardened into a professional steely demeanor. He knew exactly who the sinner was, uttering his name; "Heinrich."

"You seem less enthused, Herr Ozzie," quipped Heinrich as he reached the top platform, taking off his cap as a thin sign of "respect," genuine or otherwise; "Towards an old friend no less! Where's zhe warmth and welcome?"

The notion of being 'friends', even in the most menial sense, bothered Ozzie to an irritating degree. He made his feelings known about that precise thing; "Hff— For the millionth time we're not friends, Heinrich. We're associates in governance, nothing more. And for this long-term contract before you especially, you're only a contractor."

"Yes, and a 'contractor' zhat has been building your infrastructure for zhe past seventy years," the German snapped back, his accent thick on his breath. He sauntered towards the railings of the platform, and leant backwards against them; "While you're busy in your factories designing and manufacturing elaborate self-pleasure contraptions for zhe masses, we're maintaining and developing everyzhing important. Need I remind you of zhe five mega-hydro-electric power stations in Envy, which need I remind you were built in a span of five years? Who achieved zhat, hm?"

"Neither of us need your attitude today, Heinrich. Quit it," an increasingly irritated Asmodeus demanded.

But Heinrich wasn't done just yet; "Ah, but vhere was zhis hostility last week? When we agreed on prisoner transfers for zhe labour force?"

The sharp hissing wail of one of the gigantic hydraulic cylinders compressing marked an interruption to the sharp-tongued spat. Both heads turned to marvel at the ferocity of the noise, the machine born to iron, copper and tungsten demanding that attention be paid to it, and it only. The forsaken creation was like a needy child, beckoning for its parents to stop arguing — mother being the ever-so proud Heinrich, and father in the form of the calculated King of Lust.

Moving swiftly on from the tense exchange, having lost interest in pursuing it further, Asmodeus said calmly; "Today's the big test."

Heinrich beamed; "Zhat it is! An engineering-minded individual like yourself must be excited."

“Oh yeah, excited,” the King of Lust replied sarcastically; “Sure, we’ll go with that.”

The lack of genuine enthusiasm from the only Sin with an expert of engineering irritated Heinrich. The German hated this sort of blatant sarcasm — it nauseated him.

He froze in place and stared upwards at the towering silhouette of blue, white and purple. From underneath his facial bandages Heinrich smirked, and he said in a sly voice; “Listen, your lordship, in all due respect. Just remember who’s done all zhis for you. It wasn’t you alone.”

The sheer volume of disdain the giant Sin felt for the sinner quite literally beneath him was unparalleled. ‘Heinrich’ might’ve been beneath him in authority, but he sure did have his way of words.

“Understood,” Ozzie growled deeply.

Above all the noise and mechanisms below was a large grid of rooms, connected to the bottom of the chasmic pit by an elevator. In one of the rooms was the frantic pacing of bootsteps, clacking against the tiles from one corner of the room to the next — this had been going on for an hour.

The culprit was one of two ‘Hermanns’ occupying the room, both equally as powerful in their position of authority. Their respective builds however were quite the contrast — one tall and thin, while the other slightly shorter, but noticeably compensating in the waistline department. And as though by stereotype, their level of activity in this growingly claustrophobic room were as far different as one could get.

Greed’s Hermann, one ‘Mister Goering’, held a full wine glass of cream liqueur in his blemished red hands. His face, distinctly still human and too flushed with red, watched with growing grief at the figure pacing back and forth — the Head of Security, Hermann Ritter.

With a pronounced frown, Goering interjected with no camaraderie to speak of; “You’ve been pacing for an hour now, can you stop?”

Ritter was restless, and had all the reason to; “If you vere in mein position, trying to broker peace between two ancient buffoons, you’d be pacing too. And no, being Mammon’s courtier isn’t remotely comparable.”

Mister Goering, who too had been pacing but definitely not as much as Mister Ritter, didn't attempt to hide the contempt he had for the comeback. He shot back; "I've heard ample about this impasse between him and the Queen of Gluttony. Don't think I'm unaware, I'm not that inept!"

"Zhen don't belittle me, Goering. I won't tolerate it. I get enough of it from zhe Queen of Gluttony, and zhat Bolshevik courtier of hers! Golov… Hm! Ficken stück arbeit."

"Where is that fly lord anyway," Greed's top courtier said, scratching at the petrified rope mark around his neck; "Still hanging around that multicoloured mound of shit she calls her palace?"

"Should be here soon, that's vhat I was told. Whatever zhat means," Ritter relayed what he knew so far. Gazing down through the glass observation window to the platform below, he saw both Sin and fellow Shoktrup member conversing intensely.

Ritter looked at the black-coated Sinner, and shook his head slowly; "Look at him down zhere. Bloody mystic, always full of himself. Zhere's no tact to him."

Goering paused, and glared at Ritter with a critiquing look; "You were a mystic in life, too."

"I knew how to talk to zhem though, Heinrich doesn't. Him and his stupid castle, acting like he was some aristocrat, und not some… poultry farmer. There's a reason Asclepius has been delayed, it's largely because of him!"

"Ah. Maybe you're right, I don't know." Goering tilted his head behind Ritter, gazing out coyly through the thick glass window. Even from where he stood, he could see the colossal machine with a silhouette like none other, a mass of hydraulic tendrils crossing this way and that, upwards and downwards — there was no end to them.

The German couldn't help but smirk, pondering on quite the great irony; "The fact they need this elaborate machine for their treatment of theirs. It's pathetic. All in the name of keeping up some charade."

"It's what keeps zhem relatively stable, Goering."

"Oh yes, for sure! Hah, stable!"

Ritter didn't give the guffawing the dignity of a reply. He didn't like having to deal with 'Project Asclepius' in his portfolio, seeing it as ill-fitting for his general line of work. He didn't know what was worse about it — the bureaucratic nausea involved, or the various cadavers they used.

The loud dead-sounding buzz of the round speaker mounted on the wall alerted both sinners, who in unison looked up to it. The sound was an alert of sorts, operated by the receptionist.

Ritter knew what that meant, who in a sharp bound marched to the intercom. Pressing the red thumb-sized button, he spoke into the microphone; "Yes?"

"Her lordship's here, Herr Ritter," a female voice announced underneath the faint static hiss.

As if by hesitation of the Queen of Gluttony's presence, Ritter paused and stared emotionlessly into nothing. His singular functional eye fluttered as he made a decision, snapping himself out of his inaction. He said without further ado; "Zhank you. Send her through."

And sending her through the receptionist did. Shortly after instructing the Queen of Gluttony to enter, that being about half a minute after, she stepped into the room after showing herself the door. Dressed in a long flowing purple cape stretching down to her legs, and a simple shirt and dress pants underneath that, she made her less than extravagant entrance. She didn't even bother to greet either sinner by word of mouth, instead paying both a courteous nod of acknowledgment.

Ritter kept formalities, and welcomed the latest addition to the room; "Your lordship. Are we calm today?"

Bee didn't respond immediately, who stared in a rather unimpressed way at the white-donned sinner — there was a faint pair of noticeable bags underneath her eyes. Finally, Bee nodded in a strangely tempered fashion; "Yeah. We're calm."

Ritter asked further; "No problems?"

Bee stagnated again, evidently thinking about her next choice of words. It seemed less that she was withholding a comeback and more debating whether or not there were any problems. Bee answered

in due time, that same oddly calm demeanor coming through; “No. Nope, none at all.”

The response to his questions were perfect — too perfect. Ritter noticed this unusual behaviour from the apparently insomniac Queen, and began to wonder if something was going on.

Still, the day needed to progress, and thus the German nodded. “Good, Good,” Ritter nodded in muted approval. He looked behind the Queen of Gluttony, noticing that a second far bulkier presence was just making himself known. Ritter gestured to the second arrival with an open gloved hand; “Ah, and you’ve brought your fiance too. Wonderful.”

“I’m entitled to be here, man,” Vortex stated in his no-nonsense way, he was donning a custom-tailored black suit and yellow tie. Out of manners he closed the door behind him.

Ritter found the statement to permeate a sense of entitlement. “Yes, yes. We all are, aren’t we,” he remarked aloofly.

Wasting no more time Ritter led the entourage out of the room, heading through a second door off to the side that led outside to a descending catwalk. The air inside the giant carved out chasm smelled damp with oil and decay. Ritter monologued from the front; “We have a big day today, ladies and gentlemen! We’ve worked incredibly hard to get to zhis point, the level of readiness zhat Asclepius is now at. Centuries of studying have led to zhis moment, and only we could bring it to fruition.”

The way that Ritter went about speaking of this, every detail, was as if he believed it all to be rudimentary — a walk in the park, elementary logic that even the least savvy of people could understand. Whether this was what he genuinely believed, or but a symptom of his pridefulness for what the Shoktrup had achieved as a collective, nobody but he knew.

Descending down the catwalk by the means of an iron spiral staircase, the entourage of four steadily slogged. Lagging lethargically behind was the Queen of Gluttony, clutching the inside of her cape with all four of her hands. She was uncomfortable outright, acutely aware of everyone and everything around her. Nobody was paying attention to her especially, but she had the vice-grip dread of being watched. It didn’t help that Bee hadn’t slept much the night before — she was afraid of seeing ‘him’ again. She knew he was around, all in her head or otherwise.

In good time the group linked up with the pair of Sin and sinner on the ground floor, making the entourage half-a-dozen strong. Everything was almost in place.

Rolling past was a sheeted long steel cart, one of the wheels squeaking something awful as it was pushed along by a weary-looking hellhound dressed in a full hazmat suit. The sheet covering the entire top had the distinct outline of a body — head, torso, arms, legs and all. There was a distinct off yellow-brown stain on the entire outline, and the stench was beyond horrendous.

"Is that seriously what we're using," Goering whispered over to Heinrich, his red-flushed nose wrinkling with immeasurable disgust.

"It's vhat was specified, yes," Heinrich confirmed in the same quietened manner; "Ve have to do zhis right. If we don't, all zhat study will have been for nothing."

"Who's on that cart?" — The Queen of Gluttony had just spoken up without warning, or invite. Swinging their heads around revealed that she was staring right at them with a look of urgent demand.

"Nobody, your lordship," said Heinrich almost dismissively; "Just a body."

"Don't give me that," the sin suddenly hissed; "Don't you dare! Who's on that fucking cart?"

Heinrich glared something fierce at the Queen of Gluttony, quickly off-put by her increasingly strange behaviour over the past few days and counting. So as to avoid everyone further headache, he entertained her question; "It's a body. A hellhound. He died about a month or so ago, something to do vith—" Bee shoved him aside with abrupt brute strength, sending him staggering back; "Hey!"

In an affirmative bound Bee quickly marched up to the yellow-suited hellhound. She stopped him by grabbing him firmly by the shoulders, pulling him still. Glaring deeply through the tinted goggles of the lesser being's suit, Bee demanded; "Let me see who that is."

The hazmat-suited hellhound was taken aback; "Your lor—"

"LET ME SEE." — With all her strength Bee threw the hellhound off the cart, sending him skidding across the floor for what had to be ten feet. Bearing her teeth with agitation, she grabbed the stained white sheet and threw it off to one side.

Sure enough it was a corpse, and as Bee expected it was a hellhound — she just didn't expect it to be *that* hellhound. Morger's half-opened glassy eyes stared right back at her, his dark fur severely matted and fallen off in large hairy chunks, revealing his off-coloured, decaying shrivelled skin that lay underneath. A part of Morger's head had a visible dent near his decomposed left ear, his arms and torso too showing telltale signs of severe trauma. Though whatever flesh-eating maggot that would've inhabited the hellhound's body had been cleared for the experiment about to take place, their mark had been left — deep uneven pits peppered every single inch of him.

The world was a blur to Bee as she stared in horrified disbelief at the corpse. She too could sense Vortex's reaction from behind, that same paralysed shock she too was feeling. It was all too much.

Stepping back from the trolley yet still glaring at its grisly contents, Bee drearily muttered; "This isn't going ahead."

Ozzie blinked, his tone wholly inappropriate for the grim mood that had suddenly swept the atmosphere; "Bee? Bee, we need to do this, this is—"

"For FUCK sake Ozzie, we're not doing this! I couldn't give less of a fuck about your science experim— NGLK!!"

Without any warning a giant hand clamped tightly around Bee's neck, knocking her focus dangerously off kilter. Her vision went blurry for a second and her ears rang something awful, before her senses came back accompanied by the agony of being choked.

Being lifted up into the air by her neck, her arms clawing at Ozzie's vice grip and legs swinging violently, Bee begged; "A-Ack—!! Oh-Ozz—"

"DON'T RUIN THIS FOR ME," Ozzie bellowed, his face full of a primordial rage that had rarely been seen from his fellow Sin. It was a deep, uncontrolled anger — one fit to maim.

****clik!**** — The short but distinct sound of a pistol being readied cut like a hot knife through the tense atmosphere. Still in his rage, Ozzie snapped his head around and hissed preparing to lash out with all he could give, only to be stopped by what he saw.

There stood Ritter in short proximity, a luger pistol gripped tightly in his grip, pointed squarely at the giant Sin's head. It had been "blessed," the gleaming silver streaks criss-crossing the weapon from barrel to grip with marvellous engravings.

Ritter's demand was clear, but he was calm; "Herr Ozzie. Put her down. Now."

When the Sin didn't do what he was told, the Head of Security of all-Hades strengthened his aim. He demanded again in a silky smooth tone; "Put her down." The threat was as clear as he could make it.

Ozzie was still very much like a wild animal, hunched and growling maniacally with fellow sin still choking in his clutches. The barrel of the luger shimmered with its ring of silver, reminding the embodiment of lust of its immediate power.

After gauging the danger to himself, Ozzie glared at Ritter and at last dropped Bee — she fell to the ground limply, lurching into a coughing fit in which she heaved and writhed, grabbing desperately at her throat. Her eyes, unfocused and wild, watered painfully.

Ritter holstered his weapon in one smooth movement. As he did so, he lectured; "We're not doing zhis today, not during this. Do you idiots know vhat is at stake here? We cannot afford zhese petty infightings, so it's in your best interests to smarten up."

Bee however wasn't done just yet. Despite her undesirable state, she hoisted herself up with her weak arms, shaking with a terrible tremor. With a glare of pure disdain, she gasped; "G-GAH– *Nff-!* He– *Ngh!* H-He was… one of mine. H-He was one of **MINE.**"

Ritter returned the look with something along the lines of indifference — he didn't see any reason for the fuss. He said as much clearly; "He's just another corpse, your lordship. Vhat is he to you, really?"

Still heaving for breath Bee thought about it, full of the rage of a thousand ravenous lions. But soon that pack began to dwindle with each passing second the Queen of Gluttony's vitals came back. A thousand turned into five-hundred, then two-hundred-and-fifty, then half that, until there was only one left — famished and plagued with exhaustion, left without the strength to continue his pursuit. What was Morger to Bee? She thought about the nagging novel question, gauging it by how long she had lived, the trillions she had seen come and go over the centuries.

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Nothing. Morger was nothing. And now he was just another corpse.

Bee wearily trudged back to Vortex who was shell-shocked by the whole thing. He stared at her with a shocked, dumbfounded expression, asking by means of looks alone about what just

happened. But Bee neither had the energy nor the willpower to elaborate — she was tired.

Vortex, recognising this fact, didn't press the issue. He had his own thing to worry about, being the guilt of having done nothing to defend his fiance. But what could he have done?

Dusting himself off meanwhile and staring briefly at Bee through that tinted visor of his, the hazmat hellhound continued on his way. Uncovered cart in tow.

Bee, weighed down by forlorn, watched on. She knew what was going to become of this.

Like a wail out of agony, the elevator chimed a buzzing noise so woeful. It no longer sounded like the digital bell tone it was supposed to be. A waft of dusty air slammed into the armoured suits of the three Shoktrup Riflemen stepping out into the corridor, the smell that you get when a building hasn't been opened for well over a month. It smelt something fierce.

"Watch yourselves," the leader of the pack of three warned his fellow men, speaking German.

He pressed something on his hip what was connected to a microphone in his visored helmet; *"Centurion on watch. Legionnaire one-nine-five proceeding with code sixty-seven article two. Objective valid."*

A digital female voice buzzed into his ear; ***"Centurion presence acknowledged. Legionnaire one-nine-five permission granted for code sixty-seven article two. Objective valid, requiring completion."***

Where the 'wolfpack', as they were so named, were patrolling through was a certain apartment in downtown imp city. The building had been ordered to be made vacant almost two weeks ago, the reason for which was not made available to the public or the rest of the building's inhabitants. Men, women, children, young and old were all told in the bluntest terms to vacate the building and find somewhere new to live — the all-Hades Department for Housing would provide them all with new accommodation.

The only light that shone in that long narrow hallway were the electric torches shining from the soldiers' helmets. Almost unbelievable was the thickness of the dust in the corridor, so thick it was fit to choke, if not for the respirators the group of three each wore. The lack of overhead lighting

only made matters worse, the bulbs having burnt out weeks ago in a mixed cause of maintenance neglect and a power surge that occured days earlier. It was strangely humid in the hallway too.

So humidity, darkness, and dust — it was going to be a long search, the leading "legionnaire" thought.

Like tall dark mobile monoliths the three-strong platoon marched to the door of one particular apartment, the number having fallen off sometime ago. The leader again spoke, voice buzzing into his helmet's receiver; *"Objective twenty-five seventy-one in sight, obstruction invalid. Protocol one-fifty-one in progress."*

WHAM — CRAK!!

One forceful kick to the lock was all it took for the door to fly wide open, the obstacle's handle lodging itself into the wall. The platoon was in.

One by one the three soldiers entered, automatic rifles at the ready with torches shining all around. The light exposed the sheer amount of dust and whatever else hovering in the air, poisoning it all from one corner of the apartment to the other.

An abundance of old photos hung on the leftmost wall, telling the tale of a family of two — or perhaps four. One of the four had his face scribbled out by some kind of black marker, as though his face was forbidden for viewing.

But the platoon couldn't be any less interested in them. Immediately they got to sweeping the space around them in search of something else, scanning every inch in one slow motion. Careful heavy bootsteps thudded around, causing the settled foul dust on the ground to puff up like disturbed flour. The thickness of it couldn't be understated.

One of the two lower-ranked riflemen searched the kitchen. His respirator chuffed noisily as he breathed into it, searching the cupboards for anything that could be of relevance to what they sought to find. There was nothing, save for expired food and scattered cans.

His fellow soldier searched around the couch, overturning the cushions and tossing them aside once he had thoroughly searched them. Absolutely nothing. Nothing but dust and settled debris. Concluding his own search in the bathroom caked in mold, 'Centurion' stepped out with nothing conclusive. He grew agitated — this whole thing was turning out to be a waste of manpower.

There came a muffled sickening crack from somewhere afar, with all three in the room pausing in time. Everything in time seemed to pause, the dust flickering in the shine of the enlisteds' torches hovering dead still in the air.

The noise sounded moist, very organic, like the sound of breaking bones encased in tissue. Whatever had snapped, shifted or otherwise sounded worth investigating. But where had it come from? It definitely wasn't in the room the platoon was in, it was too muffled and distant for it to be.

In almost complete unison all armoured heads turned to one of only three doors in the apartment. The apartment only had one bedroom, plastered over with yellow-and-black tape and words of "KEEP OUT" and other uninviting phrases. No word was spoken, but the consensus was loud.

The three subconsciously braced themselves for what was to come, their precise advance up to the bedroom door cautious and calculated. Their bootsteps didn't even make a sound except for the gently shifting floor beneath them, and their breathing was hushed. In patient endurance they waited. All three men waited there, rifles at the ready, for something to happen. For anything to happen.

There came another noise. But this one was very different.

A woman softly weeped from somewhere inside, hitching and sobbing in abundant grief. The pitiful pained sound was low and gurgly, and dry as though the culprit had been crying for a while without respite. It was less like she couldn't hold it in anymore, and more so she was willingly making her presence known in the most mournful way she knew how. Probably to drum up sympathy.

Sympathy however was a foreign concept to Ritter's armed-to-the-teeth enforcers — there was an intruder in government-sanctioned property, and they needed to be removed.

…

But something prevented the riflemen from advancing. In fact they couldn't move at all. They couldn't walk, they couldn't speak, they couldn't even look around. Thoughts and internal dialogue as well had been confiscated from all three, leaving them all with only one option — to witness. Still the woman's faint sobbing continued.

The smell of rot filled the air. A grey fog, along with the dust, filled the apartment.

Your True Selves

Chapter Summary

"Just as I thought I was out, they pull me back in."

Ritter peered gauntly at the photographs, the first strong emotion he had expressed for as long as he could remember. He muttered gravely, obviously disappointed; "Anozher one." He had put an unfathomable amount of overtime in Ozzie's 'Asclepius', and all that they had managed time and time again were the same disheartening results.

Goering was on the other side of the loaded pinboard, dejected but not enough to lose all hope. He was on the verge of it however.

With a sniff and wiping his nose from the white 'medicinal' residue that rested on his red-flushed lip, he tried to point out whatever progress he could find; "There was… There was some neural redevelopment observed. An increase in bodily responses, as you heard yourself he could wail and __"

"Zhat's been observed before," Ritter slapped down the optimism; "Nozhing special."

He stepped backward from the board, taking the entire mess of string, documents, notes and whatnot in; "All zhis work for nothing. Anozher reanimated canine, anozher body to rebury. Anozher vat of liquid lead to fill zhat hole in, in case he… No, I don't want to think about zhat."

By 'that', Goering knew what his counterpart meant. He glared at Ritter; "That happened once. It won't happen again," he attempted to reassure. Vividly Goering remembered that day, the way it all went so disgustingly wrong. The way she screamed.

Instead of being assured in any form, Ritter glared back; "Don't speak so confidently." He looked and sounded like he despised Goering's optimisms. They were worse than futile — they were dangerous.

Throwing his shaking hand out at the board, Ritter began to rant. He bellowed, his voice bouncing off the walls; "They know zhis is failing, they saw it themselves! Why zhey're so obsessed with this ailing project, I don't know. But it's wasting everyone's time, zhey're just gonna have to go about zheir treatment the old way!"

His fit of sudden rage has suddenly exhausted Ritter, who put all his weight into a nearby chair. He slumped almost defeatedly, keeping upright by grabbing the top of his knee. “That bloody Ozzie…” he groaned, balling a tight fist on the table adjacent; “You know if he vasn’t so fixated with inventing different ways to get fucked up zhe arse, maybe zhis would’ve turned into something!”

There came silent mockery from the pinboard now to Ritter’s right. He hated the way it berated and mocked him, the fresh photographic prints developed the hour prior of the hound corpse’s face a dishevelled, mangled wail of agony. The lack of eyes leaving gaping sockets in their absence made it a whole lot worse. Didn’t help the fact that right above the display of horrible failure was a ceiling-mounted lamp, the yellow bulb acting as a warm spotlight.

Ritter continued to gawk at it as though against his will. Drawing a breath that swelled his chest, he wheezed; “She turned her face away. Then she left unannounced, just like zhat.”

Goering, without turning from the board, murmured; “She’s exhausted. You can see it.”

“What’s zhere to be exhausted about,” came Ritter’s indifference in vocal form; “She’s not doing any of zhis, it’s us.”

He pulled the cap from his vantablack crown, revealing all of the pitch-black matter that made up his head. It couldn’t even be described as ‘skin’ of any sort, just inexplicable material — energy manifested. Though not visible he must’ve been sweating, or at the very least feeling the heat produced by stress.

In this brief period of quiet stirring Ritter suddenly paused. He looked up, and with his one good eye squinted; “Why did he scream like zhat?”

“You said they always scream,” Goering said.

Ritter, now hinting on the contrary and in reflection, now saw otherwise; “Zhis was different.”

He got up from where he sat and strode back to the pinboard. Attention was now focused on one particular note next to the hound corpse’s agonised face. Written down by one of the assistant operators the day prior, he noted how ‘Asclepius’’ feedback panel seemed to detect something different. Something very different. Perhaps this hadn’t been all for nothing.

“Where’s zhe phone,” muttered Ritter with a tinge of urgency. He found it sitting on the table where he had slumped just before, wasting no time to go over to it and hastily dial a number. The number he had dialed was answered in no time at all.

“Herr Ozzie? It’s best you come over here.”

All eyes focused on the fresh addition to the pinboard, an archived reading printed out by ‘Asclepius’ during the trial the day before. A message code printed in bold black letters was as clear as day.

Ritter prodded his finger at the reading, and turned to the giant Sin standing behind him; “Zhese numbers here. Vhat do you reckon it means?”

Critically Ozzie examined the line of code, squinting as hard as he could. In spite of his efforts to recognise so, he couldn’t see anything remarkable; “That’s… ‘S just a generic feedback code, nothing special about it. Seriously, this is what you brought me out here for?”

“Nein,” affirmed the German, being quite adamant. Repeatedly he stabbed his finger into the reprinted sequence of numbers; “Nein nein nein, zhis is different, very different! This, this is— there’s something very familiar about zhis. I know it, I just know it! Something in here…”

Fizzarolli, who too had tagged along for support, leant into the Sin’s ear from his shoulder and snickered; “He’s gone mad.”

“SHUT UP, jester, I’m not mad! Inside, there’s something inside this code, I know it! Vhat it is exactly I don’t know, but there’s something here I… I recognise.” Ritter lulled himself back into deep silent focus.

Whatever he had apparently discovered was the only real result he had seen come from Asclepius since he had gotten actively involved. If only it wasn’t so cryptic as this. In all reality, Ritter wasn’t even sure as to why something in the code was making him react in the way he was.

Determined to keep his train of thought, the anxious German shot his hand out towards his colleague; “A pen, Goering, give me a pen!”

Goering did just as he was told, Ritter returning the favour with a quick sharp ‘dankeshoen’. The tip of the pen scanned anxiously over the numbers, for the moment acting as a pointer for the code’s frantic reader. If he could still visibly sweat, the Head of Security would be doing so profusely.

The pen suddenly stroked a vertical line somewhere along the code. Ritter had just authored a circle around a ‘1’. The pen traversed carefully along again, before two rows down circling yet another number.

This continued, on and on, row after monotonous row of digital coded jargon. To anyone else but Ritter this was nothing but the scribbling of a mad man, desperate to find meaning in something developed off algorithmic procedure. Whether really a secret code or not, Ritter didn't seem to care, continuing down to the last row where the final number was highlighted — '8'.

Huffing like he had completed a marathon, Ritter pulled back and took in his work. Amidst all the bold black number sequences were now little red circles over a particular number. A sort of pattern had emerged, imagined or otherwise — the circles created a downward 'diagonal' pattern. Not flawless, but the pattern was there quite clearly enough.

Noticing this emerging sequence, Ritter poised his hands onto his hips; "Who put zhis board together?"

"Doctor Herbin," Ozzie replied, but quickly rebuked; "Ritter, just hold on a minute! I don't see why __"

The next order came fast; "Goering, call Herr Herbin and tell him to come over. We need him quick." His accomplice did just that. But Ritter had become too impatient, adding right after; "Tell him it's my direct order!"

"I'm on it, give me a second!"

Amidst the unravelling episode came an unsettling sight. Emerging from the impossible inky-blackness of Ritter's face came an actual, visible, lipless grin. It revealed itself like the steady illumination of lights, each tooth emerging like individual bulbs until a complete grin consumed the German's darkness-shrouded face.

He heel-turned to face the Sin, proclaiming in an act of defiance against doubt; "We are going to get to zhe bottom of zhis, tonight. Mark mein words, man! Mark them! You too, jester!"

From across the room with the old-fashioned telephone held to his ear, Goering delivered the unfortunate news; "Herbin's on the phone, Herr Ritter, he says he can't come. He can speak to you on the phone."

"Okay, good enough," Ritter groaned, though it wasn't. He strided a little too eagerly to the phone and grabbed it from his accomplice's hands. He held the receiver up to his ear; "Herbin! I need you to answer me truthfully. Do you have a copy of zhe feedback readings Asclepius gave you?"

“Ah– Err— I do? I do, yes I do,” Herbin replied on the other side of the line, sounding a little put off by Ritter’s strange eagerness; *“Why do you ask?”*

“I’ve found a pattern in zhe code. I need your input, about vhat it means.”

“A pattern?”

“Yes, a pattern. You’re a smart man, I reckon you can help us out on zhis. I’ve highlighted zhe numbers of interest.”

“Oh– Okay? Well okay, read them out to me… uh— H-Herr Ritter.”

Ritter’s anticipation was excruciating. His hands were in shambles as he spun around to glance at the board. An eagle’s eye pinned to the highlighted numbers, the anxious German bluntly read them out — ‘one’ … ‘seven’ … ‘zero’. Figure after figure was read from the convoluted sequence, scanned in order from left to right and top to bottom. Between each number Doctor Herbin would confirm with a hum that he had recorded the relayed information.

Soon they were done after much suspense, which Doctor Herbin confirmed as such. By Ritter’s eager direction the Doctor read out what had been written — ‘one’, ‘seven’, ‘zero’, ‘seven’, ‘one’, ‘nine’, ‘one’, ‘eight’.

“Okay. … Aaand what’s that supposed to mean,” Ozzie asked the most obvious.

This is where everything ground to a halt. What exactly did it mean? After all there was no obvious subliminal message, other than the unusual way the numbers seem to align diagonally with surprising perfection. If there was an actual message in the receiving code, then it was hidden extremely well.

This is where theory came into play. Goering figured it to be an error message, ‘Asclepius’’ way of telling its operatives that something was wrong with it. Ozzie was next, who from his knowledge of the project had seen something similar — a startup code, signalling that everything was working as programmed and ready for use. Fizzarolli of course shared the same theory.

Ritter meanwhile had nothing. As far as he was concerned he didn’t want to speculate or theorise, there was seldom any time for that. And with a program already years behind schedule, the Head of Security demanded solid answers.

“Herr Ritter. I might know what it is.” Doctor Herbin’s old nasally voice buzzed low through the telephone, the deafening silence amplifying his otherwise tempered mannerisms.

Ritter was at full attention; “Go on.”

“It’s not just a code, sir. It’s a date.”

‘Blissful Catharsis’. This was both what Bee was feeling, and the name for the purple-tinted injection she had taken to her upper right arm. Almost immediately it took effect, the Sin’s eyes fluttering closed and rolled back as she sunk lazily back into her beanbag chair. Downtime had finally come.

Sliding into a period of pleasure for however long, Bee droned a drowsy hum through her closed lips, a broad smirk creasing her yellow muzzle. A numb feeling took hold of her entire self, and at long last she could relax. She could almost sleep. How she wanted to. If only she had Vortex with her right now — he had gone out for his line of work with Verosika. Apparently she hadn’t been doing too well, something to do with a bout of declining health.

“You look drained, sweetheart.” Bee heard herself speak from the empty lounge chair tucked to a corner of her room.

“Mm.. Like ya wouldn’t believe,” Bee murmured back in her drug-fuelled spell. She could hardly get the words out any clearer. The fact she was also half-naked added to the look of disgrace.

The second presence made an acknowledging hum with her lips. From the sounds of things she was pouting. Fingers rapped thoughtfully against the cushioned leather armrests as the occupant thought.

Finally the presence confided; ***“You gotta stop worrying about him, hon. It’s been decades.”***

“I’ve seen him,” Bee said meekly, briefly losing consciousness before snorting back to lucidity, but only just; “I keep seeing him.”

"Because you keep worrying," Bee's copy added in a soothing, silky manner. There was however a quite intentional accusatory undertone. ***"All this worry and loss of rest, and for what exactly? Anxieties."***

Bee was barely responsive, the effects of the injection taking a serious toll on her spacial awareness. She might as well have been unconscious altogether with the way she was going.

"Oh for— Wake up you lousy tramp. Look at you. What happened to us?"

The disgraced 'Queen' on the pink beanbag chair grumbled something incoherent, sounding more like a pained groan instead of words.

Looking at the pitiful display, Bee's visitor in black gave up trying. ***"Shame."***

Bee exploded awake when the door to her room loudly knocked thrice. The sudden exertion caused a sharp pain to course through her, everything from her eyes to her legs ached torturously. No rest for the wicked.

Bee didn't even remember saying 'come in', but apparently she did as Golov politely entered, shutting the door behind him. Dressing down didn't exist for Minister Golov, donning much the same black suit and tie he wore in Bee's presence — old Communist Party badge and all. Under his arm was a tan folder, and in it was a document.

Barely awake, or perhaps barely alive, Bee peered drearily towards her courtier; "Mmmh.. Whuh— what is it?"

Minister Golov barely said anything except that there was a message for her. From Lust.

The news didn't immediately register to Bee, still deep under the influence, but about ten seconds later she managed to feel some interest, although impaired. She was overall dizzy, a small pricking pain still throbbing from the injection site. Almost dropping the folder handed over to her, Bee flipped it open to find a document — a message — staring back at her.

The message, sent to her by hers truly the Head of Security, was awakening to say the least. He knew exactly why Bee fled in the middle of 'Asclepius'' umpteenth trial run — she was cowering from her past. The message reminded her, very emphatically, that she was to remain staunch in every decision she would make, and every decision she had made, and any sign of 'weakness' as Ritter put it would be met with intense scrutiny. From his office, and from the Nine Realms Committee altogether. This was huge.

"How fucking **DARE THEY."** Bee's drug lethargy seemed to be completely expunged through her anger. That was until she tried to get up from the beanbag chair, the effort in which she belched and almost made herself vomit across the floor. Settling her stomach, Bee fumed; "Doubting me. Doubting my motherfucking ability! Who is he, huh? **WHO IS <u>HE?</u>"**

By some unfathomable bout of luck the disgraced queen managed to roll back up onto her feet. Her lack of coordination was profound, stumbling over herself as she paced angrily, clutching the message in her grasp so tight her nails poked holes through the paper.

“I’m not running from shit. **I’M NOT RUNNING FROM SHIT.”**

Golov stood by as he watched Bee pace uneasily, swaying like she was about to fall over any second. “There’s something else,” he interrupted his boss mid-pace, his tone unfeeling.

Bee’s head snapped to his direction; **“WHAT,”** she boomed.

Like the sound of a whip cracking the vintage telephone placed beside Bee’s bed blared noisily. The timing was impeccable.

Clambering footsteps about her, Bee staggered with haste to the telephone — she knew who it was. Throwing the phone off its holster, Gluttony embodied barked; “You got a lotta fucking nerve to pull this on me. ***A <u>WHOLE</u>*** lotta nerve.”

Sure enough, Ritter’s voice slyly echoed into Bee’s ear; *“You know zhe reason, don’t deny it. All we need to be sure of is your resolve, whether it’s still zhere.”*

“Resolve, what fucking resolve? What are you talking about?!” There came no reply to her intense demand. Ritter’s sudden silence was louder than any retort he could’ve given, cutting into Bee in a deeply personal way. He always had a way of saying things, even when he said nothing at all.

Through the quiet and lack of elaboration, something became very obvious to Bee — a game was being played. A sick sort of game. A game that was intended to make or break, it happened every so often. One common denominator was consistent with every instance of these ‘games’ — there was no choice but to play along. Even if there was another option, Gluttony’s ‘ruler’ couldn’t muster the fight against the trials.

With a reluctant sigh that made her shiver, Bee asked; “What exactly do you want from me?”

*“Assurances, your lordship, zhat’s all we ask for.”*The words sounded accusatory to an extreme degree; *“You’re complicating a situation zhat has no need to be complicated. We understand you have your fears, but you let zhem control your impulses far too often as of late.”*

An almost dead-eyed look appeared in Bee’s far-off gaze as she stared into nothingness. Her expression became blank, disturbingly absent of emotion. “I’ve seen and done things you wouldn’t

even begin to understand. Don't talk to me about impulses and fears."

All that Ritter gave to this threat was a grunt. Though very dismissive, Bee hoped that he got the message she intended to convey.

If Ritter had, he didn't sound as though he got it. Instead he moved on in a strange sort of fashion; *"Our best efforts to put zhe last fortnight's situation behind us have failed."*

"...What."

"You have a fighter in zhat lady," Ritter spoke as though Bee knew what he was talking about; *"She's still going."*

"What are you—…" Bee's tongue tripped over itself, words failing her. She tried two more times to speak, before giving up before the thrice attempt and demanding; "Quit it with this cryptic junk, who're you talking about?"

"Zhat hog we sent up to zhat corner of the world. Turns out zhe bionic recording eye we implanted into its skull works. She's still kicking."

"…Loona?" Though she hadn't thought about the hellhound at all since her banishment, Bee hadn't expected her to remain alive much after. To hear that she was still going in some capacity was strange. Almost… disappointing.

"Who else?" Ritter was heard shuffling something in front of him like paper, tapping against whatever desk he sat before. He then cleared his throat; *"Seeming zhat you're adamant in your position as queen of zhe canine species, it's only fair zhat we… allow you to decide vhat happens."*

"To decide–... Uh–…" The cat had Bee's tongue in a vice grip. In fact it was choking her, claws and all. Being in charge was all that she could ask for, but now that it was in her hands, she didn't know what to do with it. The most 'in charge' she had been was for her weekly parties, but this wasn't that — this was real bureaucracy.

As if looking for an answer she turned slightly to Minister Golov, who stared back with that same stoney expression he always had. If he could he would intervene, but this was out of his control. The ball was in Bee's court, and there was nobody to pass it on to. This was hers squarely.

Realising she had no refuge, Bee turned back towards the blankness of the wall, the etched hexagonal patterns glaring back. “I’ll think about it,” she whispered into the receiver.

“Make it quick,” was the Head of Security’s bland reply. The call ended at once.

Cold water splashed across Loona’s face as she fixed herself up that Monday morning. A weekend had passed and there was much achievement — Loona was now a bonafide babysitter. She didn’t know how she did it, but somehow by some intuition she didn’t know she had, she had made it work. A part of her even enjoyed the learning experience.

Wiping her mouth from the spots of toothpaste that had settled on her pale skin, Loona readied herself for her journey home. Maya’s mother would be coming back in a few hours, and Jim would be coming to pick her up around the same time. If luck was on her side, they’d both arrive in sync.

Small footsteps fumbled up to the closed bathroom door, before a frantic knock rattled the door. “Loona! Loona!”

Loona had just begun brushing her hair, making herself look at least somewhat presentable; “Yeah, I’m here! What’s up?”

“Momma’s here, she wants you to open the door!”

Halfway through untangling a difficult knot in her silver mane of hair, Loona paused; “Already? Shoot, it’s only eight… A-Alright, tell her I’ll be a minute!” The babysitter heard the little terror scurry off to the front door to relay the message. Luckily Loona had gotten dressed as early as she did.

About a minute and a half later Loona left the bathroom, stumbling over herself a little as she adjusted her long black socks. An all-too familiar pang in her stomach told her that she was hungry, but breakfast would have to wait until later — whatever time her “taxi” home came around.

Nudging Maya aside a little, Loona opened the front door, finding that indeed ‘momma’ at last had returned home from who-knows-where. She looked exhausted from the early morning flight, the few feeble hours of sleep she had gotten evident in her bag-ridden eyes. A pair of glasses hung loosely and lopsided over her nose.

“Oh, hey! You’re back,” Loona greeted the returning matriarch, hesitating at the fatigued display before her.

“Heyy,” Loona’s employer groggily greeted back, fighting hard to stifle a yawn. “Uff! Well hey, aha, glad to see the house didn’t burn down.”

“Aha. Err… yeah,” Loona said back that bit plainly, mildly perturbed by the sudden crass remark.

Maya’s mother lost the battle to yawn, though she politely covered her mouth to avoid being too rude. “Ahh— Mu-Maya wasn’t too much trouble, was she..?”

“Oh— Oh no, not at all! Not at all, sh-she’s a great kid.” The disguised hound sounded surprised at her own admission. The whole thing was everything that Loona, purely an amateur in taking responsibility, wished to happen, the best case scenario. She looked down at the brunette girl, and smiled; “Ain’t that right, huh?”

Maya nodded excitedly.

Whether Chloe, Maya’s mother, approved of the appraisal or not she didn’t show it — she looked positively drained after all. Like someone barely alive Chloe staggered past her daughter and the babysitter, which even understanding the exhaustion side of things Loona found a little negligent. To Loona, who had been for the betterment of two to three days looking after the girl half her height, it was like observing someone hungover in search of their bed. The ‘hungover’ look was helped by the sloppy, uneven way the mother had buttoned her coat.

And that’s exactly where the businesswoman headed. Following closely behind with Maya in tow, Loona watched as the mother-of-one, with no more care to give, stumbled into her bedroom, dropped the suitcase in her fading grip, and launched herself facefirst into her bed. A weak muffled mumble escaped her lips.

Loona was left stumped. Staring awkwardly into the bedroom at the barely conscious woman lying limp, the disguised hound tried to find her words; “So, uh… Didja need me to do anything else, or…”

Despite the question being clear as day, there came no answer.

Loona tried a different approach; “I can go make her breakfast if you want me to.”

It wasn’t really a reply, but Loona noticed the faint ‘thumbs-up’ the incapacitated Chloe gave.

To make breakfast is exactly what the babysitter did. Not that she had any other choice, she couldn't just let the poor kid starve. Not with her mother conked out like she had a night out. Ushering Maya along Loona escorted them both to the sterile plain kitchen, its lack of character still nauseating. Breakfast was simple, a bowl of cereal with an abysmally low health star rating, and stale food colouring to match.

Loona was busy pouring milk into the o-shaped pile settled in the small white ceramic basin. The sound of it was enough to muddle Maya's words to her ears, making whatever she was trying to say indiscernible.

Loona reacted, looking up; "Hm? Oh!"

Maya was standing there gazing right up at her with a spread-thin smile, a full hand of about half a dozen fifty dollar notes held up in her tiny palms. "Momma said to give you this," she conveyed proudly.

"Oh! Well thank you," Loona said back with a smile, trying her hand at giving a kid-friendly tone that sounded pretty genuine.

She plucked the payment out of the child's hands and began counting while Maya retrieved her food. Loona counted six-hundred dollars in cold hard cash — a very decent take. A welcome surprise to say the least, the most she had expected was half of that.

All in all Loona's job was done. But she had to be sure of one final thing, considering the mother's condition. In one gentle move the babysitter went over to the dining table where Maya now camped herself, swinging her legs like pendulums as she crunched on her simplistic meal.

Loona bent down to eye level, placing a hand on the corner of the table to get Maya's attention; "Your mom's pretty conked out in there, gotta feelin' she'll be like that for a while. Ya gonna be okay here?"

Maya didn't need to think about it too hard, nodding in an exaggerated swing that made her hair bob up and down.

Loona couldn't help but smile, her opinion of Maya having drastically changed since she first arrived. "Good," she uttered, then felt the need to add; "Hey, yanno I meant it when I said you're a great kid. You're gonna become something, I just know it."

The heartmelting beam of eye-twinkling smile Maya gave in return made Loona chuckle to herself. She — the 'nice witch' as Maya had called her the day before — had made her happy, that's all she could ask for. All that the hound had feared turned out to be just that — fears. Nothing more.

A silent buzz came from the pocket of Loona's shorts. Fishing the phone out of the fabric slot, she found a text from Jim — "Outside now," it read bluntly. He never punctuated his texts.

"Oop! That's my ride," Loona heaved as she stood back up. Before she walked out with bag in hand, she turned to Maya and pointed; "You be safe now, 'kay?"

As she finally left, with Maya chomping happily on her cereal, Loona heard Chloe on the far side sawing logs.

The door glided gracefully shut behind Loona as she skipped down the path. Parked perfectly aligned with the footpath was that very same familiar old utility truck, gray paint and all, the fresh 'cut and polish' job gleaming under the morning sun. In spite of its age not a speck of rust dared to form on its steel body.

Loona swung the door open eagerly and dropped the bag at the floor first, being greeted by the sound of 'Glittering Prize' by 'Simple Minds' droning low on the radio.

Already Jim was looking at her with an expecting grin; "How'd ya go?"

"Ah, good!" Loona pulled the seatbelt across herself and clipped it in. She relaxed after pulling the door shut; "Got there in the end. She's a great kid, really is. Kinda reminds me of me a bit, but not really if that makes sense."

Jim shifted the car into 'drive' and pulled away. They had a half-hour or so drive ahead of them. Sniffing, he inquired; "Ah yeah? How so?"

Only then did it hit Loona as to how similar she was to the girl. She thought about it a little more; "It's like–... well she's different. Mostly keeps to herself, lost in her own little world. But if there's something involving what she loves, hah! Woo boy, does she open up. Full o' beans!"

Spots of fickle rain began to spot the windscreen as a sunshower rolled in for the earth's morning water. The sound of the droplets hitting was soft, and delicate like silk. One upward flick of a lever sent the wipers periodically swiping in long arcs across the glass.

Jim hummed a positive note in approval, his hands rotating the wheel to veer right. "Ah, well. Sounds like ya did well! Half expected ya to throw in the towel and drink your sorrows away with a cig."

A wooden groan rattled from Loona's throat, her eyes rolling suit; "Yeah-yeah, whatever. Jackass." She kind of missed these teases of his.

Going quiet Loona rolled her head to gaze outside, temple pressed gently against the window. Dozens of droplets now splattered the glass, making it look like it was a clear mosaic with a ripply texture. The world rolled by at a steady pace.

A thought suddenly came to Loona's mind, and she expressed it proudly; "You got a boomer's humour, dude." The seasoned passenger princess looked smug as she proclaimed this.

"Say wha— excuse me?"

"Yeah! Ya heard me," Loona snorted a grin, knowing she had got him good; "You got it bad!"

To this cheek Jim glanced briefly at Loona with a second-long smirk, a silent 'how dare you' of sorts, before he focused back on the road. "Fack off, no I don't," the driver tried his hardest to deny.

But Loona was on him like, well, a hound-dog; "Uhh, you do! Not a single thing you've quipped hasn't had mad boomer energy."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Well go on, name one."

The goth went to prove her ever-so-accurate judgment. A thin, wider than wide grin spread from ear to ear. "A few nights ago," Loona began to recall, her playful cockiness plain to see and hear; "Before I left to do this thing, you thought I had made a dad joke — psh! As if... Annnd what didja do? You laughed your hillbilly ass off for five fucking minutes, over a "pun" I didn't even make!"

Already the conversation had become nothing but shooting the breeze. Loona knew this from the get-go, but it was all that she could ask for. It beat being stuck at home wallowing in self-pity, that's for sure. Furthermore, she had almost completely forgotten as to what she was supposed to feel self-pitiful about. All things considered, things were looking up and up.

And so that's exactly what the pair of them did, taking turns shooting the breeze about nothing whatsoever. Starting from Loona's point about Jim's case of the 'boomers', they segued to other even less important things — cars, music, women. Interesting people in general they had seen out and about in public. The mundane, the strange, the weird and wonderful, the pair of them talked about it all. That was until Loona, spent after a very educational weekend, fell asleep.

The 'passenger princess' woke up soon as the ignition cut off, snorting as she awoke. The familiar old timber house stared right back as Loona stretched, cracking her knuckles behind her head. She mumbled something that even she couldn't understand.

In a gentle rock the car wobbled on its suspension as Jim stepped out, the only remaining weight being Loona's slender frame. Shortly after gaining consciousness again she got out too, stepping onto the damp gravel underneath her feet that glistened after the brief morning shower. The sky was remarkably clear, a deep saturated blue streaked with the odd straggly cloud like someone had gone over it with a brush. A painting.

Giving the sky its due attention, Loona shuffled onto the porch and inside the house. Jim acted as her personal doorman and held the door open as the goth entered, bag in tow. The bag dropped with a light 'thunk' beside the doorway as Loona went for the living room, welcoming the couch with open arms when she threw herself onto its cushioned surface.

"OUFFF, fuck yeeahh," Loona whined long in satisfaction; "Jim I swear, I think I'm in love with your couch because DAMN is it good…"

"Go on, make love to it then," Jim remarked grotesquely with a grin, a wheeze following soon after. He thought he was clever.

But this was nothing compared to what the hound was capable of. Loona paused at this and slowly turned her head to Jim. A conniving smirk grew across her face, her eyes narrowing; "Yanno what, I might. But you're cleanin' it up after, big man."

Barely Jim managed not to spit out the water in his mouth, swallowing it laboriously. He didn't know whether to laugh or dry retch. Arching his shoulders, he pointed to the queen of the couch all the way from the kitchen. "You do that, and I'm building you a kennel. Shit! Ya damn animal." It wasn't far from the truth, technically.

"Yeah-yeah, try me. Fucker," Loona grinned louder, snickering as she turned her attention elsewhere. Her eyes got to wondering like a nomad around the old-fashioned interior with a mix of new-age furniture, having missed its nearly antique charm compared to the boringly sterile interior of Maya's mother's new-build, white-bleached home. She hated it, the way it looked like a real estate agent had left their generic photoshoot decorations inside, abandoned and left to the next tenants to barely tolerate.

Tucked in a far corner of the living room, next to the bay window facing outwards, was a little something that caught Loona's eye. She stopped and focused on it, squinting to get a better look without actually moving where she slumped.

"What's that," Loona subconsciously said to herself, though it was loud enough for Jim to hear.

Of course Jim had heard the indirect question, and he too focused on the point of interest. Hanging to the leftmost corner relative to the bay window was the photograph of a man decades old. He was old, dressed like it too, sitting in a lounge chair looking up at the camera with a smile and eyes that had seen many years. His hairline was much to be desired, left white and straggly across his pale old dome and a thick bristly moustache to match, trimmed around the edges. A vertical-striped white shirt covered his slim frame, which too was held by a pair of black suspenders from his brown old trousers — a row of three medals were pinned over his heart. To anyone who saw him, he looked like the most stereotypical example of an old veteran.

Jim smiled at the picture, and exhaled gently; "Ah. Don't suppose I've told ya about the old man."

Loona shook her head, glancing at the twenty-something year old behind her; "Don't think so."

"That there," Jim began, with Loona's attention on his story; "That old bugger, is my great-great granddad, Lewis. Veteran of The Great War. Well, World War One, but I still call it The Great War."

When Loona quipped with a quick and cheeky "okay boomer," Jim shushed her and continued on his merry way; "He volunteered sometime around nineteen-sixteen, went to the Western Front 'til the war was over. Hung around Britain for a little bit, then apparently went to some place in Russia the following year when they had their business happen. Ah shit, did he have some stories to tell, according to dad."

To her own surprise Loona had become invested in this slice of family history. She coaxed for more information; "Yeah? Like what?"

"Ah, yanno, war stories," bona fide storyteller Jim relayed; "Half of it was about the stuff that went on in France, but apparently… Russia had a particular effect on him." As he told the story, Jim hobbled to his lounge chair and sat himself down. He pried the brown boots off his feet, setting them just off the carpet; "He'd go on about how it wasn't right. Something about the wind, the air, the things he'd spot out on patrol and nightwatch. Where he went, it was a volunteer expedition, it was particularly, uh… lonely? Like North Russia isn't a very populated place, so there's a lotta dense wilderness and plains. Wasn't back then, still isn't. Just a very strange land."

Now Loona knew a whole lot about strange lands, having been to a few places during her employment days. She however couldn't recall ever going to the largest country on Earth — except that one time, but that didn't really count. It almost ended in disaster, and if it weren't for Loona realising Millie and Moxxie hadn't come back, it would've spelled the end for IMP. She wondered how it was doing now, without her.

Taking in the photograph, Loona pondered upon the wrinkle-ridden face of old Lewis Steele. Studying it a little longer than necessary, she imagined that he wouldn't take kindly to her presence. Typical old people and all.

"Huh…" was Loona's grunt in response to all she'd been told. An impromptu thought completely unrelated to anything else came to her mind; "Say, about your dad. Completely outta left field I know, but uhh what's he doing for a livin'? You know all about my dad, think I should get to know yours yanno."

"My old man? Fucken, uhh… ah shit, what does he do? Gimme a sec, lemme just." Jim's search for an answer led him to his phone, which he had now just taken from his trouser pocket and brought up his contacts.

Loona tried to stop whatever her glorified roommate was planning; "Oh no, don't call him! You don't have to ask, was just curious."

"Nah-nah I'm curious as well, I don't even know." And with that he held the phone up to his ear having evidently called 'the old man'. It didn't take long for someone to pick up; "Yeah, dad? Hey just asking, what'd ya do for a living? … Yeah, like work." Jim listened intently to the patriarch of his family, keeping still as anything out of respect for his 'old man'. "Nah-ye you told me about that! Ah-kay, right."

With a firm answer obtained, Jim immediately relayed it to Loona as though it was imperative she knew at once; "He was a mechanic, now a foreman at a mine, a country mile west o' here."

"Pfff, aight cool," Loona nodded along, a crooked thin grin breaking out; "Seriously though, ya didn't need to—"

"Yeah, dad, didja say something? … Oh yeah-yeah, she's here."

"DUDE."

One awkward dad conversation later — plus twelve and a half hours.

A big, tall, lazy specimen of white and dark grey fur lay lengthways on the couch, zoned out to reruns of a show from twenty-odd years ago. The specimen was Loona, having since returned to her true form, and the show she watched mindlessly was one she didn't even know existed until three hours ago — *'The Sopranos',* or something along those lines. Who knew that a show about a big, balding New Jerseyan with a superiority complex could be so interesting. Already the hellhound knew what sort of YouTube binge-watch she'll dive face-first into come the morning.

In classic night owl fashion Loona was the only one up at this hour, that being around nine-thirty at night. Jim had retired early to bed, a combination of having to drive nigh on an hour back and forth to pick Loona up, on top of a sudden call-in for work an hour later, being the catalyst for one very sleepy blue-collar. His very eccentric, shapeshifting housemate was the polar opposite. She wanted to stay up, revelling in all the free time she now had to herself like a pig to mud, feeling she had taken it for granted pre-Maya. But with three figures now in hand, Loona didn't see it at all as a net-negative — Maya's eccentric interests and little quirks made it all the better too.

As Loona watched her show, there was something else milling around in the inner recesses of her mind. It wasn't disturbing her peace, but the part of her that mulled on it hoped it to be nothing more than some weird hallucination, a symptom of having just awoken from a nap where the brain didn't know whether to dream or snap back to reality. That black-and-white film; those two men; the cuckoo calling delicately somewhere out of scene; the clean, graceful river.

"Everything is an eternal circle, and it repeats and repeats itself."

Again, it didn't bother her all that much — it was just one of those things to figure out whether it was real or not. But say it was just a figment of imagination, a brain stuff-up of sorts, where had it come from? She couldn't recall ever having watched something like that. And again, why specifically that film, and that scene, in the context of everything else?

"Oop! Awwwhh, fuuu— shit." Loona looked down at her black pajama shirt with the words *"I'M TOO TIRED FOR THIS SHIT"* printed in white, and saw that a large gob of mango-flavoured yogurt had dared to land itself between *"TIRED"* and *"FOR".* So much for that freshly washed shirt.

Lamenting the fact she now had to get up and clean, Loona exacerbated a grunt and trudged for the kitchen sink. The green sponge soaked in dish soap made light work of the little dairy-based nuisance, and Loona's shirt returned to a state of cleanliness.

A thunderstorm was passing outside, and lightning periodically caressed the night sky in long illuminating tendrils. This happened again, and just as Loona was looking up, through the rain she thought she had seen something. Somewhere outside. She hadn't really seen anything from where she stood in the kitchen, at the furthest point from the window, but something outside seemed out of place.

Loona stopped and froze. She had to investigate, being the only one awake. Using the rain clattering off the roof as cover for her footsteps, the hound tip-toed to the bay window, and peered outside just out of sight. Another bout of lightning flashed, and from it she could see someone climbing up the stairs onto the verandah. All in black.

Now Loona was on edge. But she was frustrated too — how dare some confident little arsehat try to mosey up to *her* house during *her* quiet time. They were going to pay dearly.

Effectively going into "fuck it" mode, Loona's sneaking around turned into an upright march. She flew up through the corridor and up to the front door, and in a few clean moves grabbed and loaded Jim's Lee-Enfield. The bolt clunked loudly as Loona chambered a round, loud enough for whoever was outside to understand that she was armed. She didn't even care that she was still in her hellhound form, the intruder was going to 'find out' anyway.

Tension immobilised Loona for a second and she pressed her back against the adjacent wall. She took a deep breath, and closed her eyes briefly; "Uff! Okay… Okay!"

The door flung open, and the barrel shot up to meet the intruder's face.

"Woooahh there girl! Look atchu with that boom-stick!"

Loona could only make one sound; "...HUH."

Cloaked in a giant cloak with a headcovering was, to the hellhound's staggering bewilderment, Gluttony personified herself. There she stood, her overall black covering drenched in rain in a scene straight out of some horror film. Except the build-up hadn't paid off to any scare, instead turning out to be baffling amazement.

Hardly could Loona speak; "You're— What are y— Huff— Eck— I—" The barrel of the rifle tapped the floor in her weakened grip.

"Oh shush-shush, I know I know," Bee hushed in a sing-song voice, putting a finger over Loona's muzzle. It was lightly soaked from the rain, and dampened the goth's lips. "I getcha, this is weird as fuuuuck! Just wanted to come 'round and see how you're going, after… Well, yanno."

Though still completely stunned, Loona managed to find herself some semblance of coming back to her senses. Her stunned expression hardened, and became deadly serious. She uttered woodenly; "Yeah. Yeah I do know."

Bee winced; “Yeeeahh. No, I get it, this is awkward and I shoulda made some sorta effort to ask you beforehand, but—” She paused when she noticed Loona going to slam the door shut. “Wait, no-no-no! Sweetie, I just wanna talk to ya!”

“You’ve talked enough. Now fuck off,” Loona growled, hate shining both through her voice and red eyes.

“Awh sweetie, come on! Just a talk—” She stopped herself halfway from pleading when she tried to force the door to remain open, to Loona’s very audible annoyance. “I didn’t want it to be this way, you’re out here for a reason! I made the decision!”

Just as Loona was about to slam the sin’s fingers between the door and the frame, she froze; “You what?”

A relieved sigh came from Bee; “Yess! This was for your own good, girl, the best case scenario! I didn’t come all the way out here to rub it in your face, I wanted to explain.”

Another bolt of lightning flashed the gloomy sky with bright electric blue, revealing a sky of endless thick dark clouds.

Loona was left standing there, still holding the door firmly shut with all four of Bee’s hands inches away from being clobbered. How she still wanted to shut the visitor out, but the hunger to know more had just emerged. “What else have you been hiding? Go on, spit!”

“Hiding, I’ve been hiding nothinnng! It’s just— well— you’ve been out here, an-and I couldn’t get to ya! Now c’mooon, be a darl and open the door. Let’s catch up.”

Befuddlement fell upon Loona, leaving her unsure. All of the words sounded like answers, answers to all the questions she had since a week and a bit ago, but at the same time none of it sounded concrete. For all she knew, Bee might very well be coaxing her out for something outside of her own interest. Manipulation. But still, an answer was an answer, and Loona wanted them.

“No,” Loona put her foot down; “We’ll talk like this.”

“‘S all good, girl. I understand,” Bee quietly cooed under the pelting rain, sounding very understanding — whether she actually was was another question.

All four of her hands retracted away from the door. “As I said,” the sin explained; “I only made the decision to keep you away from them. They wanted a solution, and I gave them one! And yanno what, they’re satisfied. Thought I’d come out and just say that, that’s all. Ain’t nothin’ about rubbing anything in your pretty lil face.”

“Yeah well I’m not fucking satisfied,” Loona grunted; “I’ve been miserable. D’ya know what your government goons did to me? They beat me! They beat me, and they threw me the fuck out here, with nothing but the clothes on my motherfucking back!”

Bee was silent after this.

The silence, with nothing but the rain to fill in the lack of conversation, only irritated Loona more; “What, ya just came all the way out here to say that?”

The answer to this came after the roll of distant thunder. “No, no. I do have a little more to say, and then I’ll be outta your hair.” The sin’s voice sounded hesitant, but rather serious; “Ya need to stop some things.”

From inside Loona felt the creeping feeling of dread, rising up like bile in her stomach and swirling upwards. She swallowed, gripping the shoulder-end of the Lee-Enfield in her grip tighter; “Dunno what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, you do. Ya sure do.” The remark sounded very strange, and Loona swore she could hear her voice change slightly. Her accent faltered. Bee continued; “Yanno… I get it. Ya wanna be adventurous, explore the world. But the thing is, an’ I’m sure a smart girl like yaself understands this, buuut there’s some things ya can’t wander into all willy-nilly. ‘S dangerous! Ya understand all that, right?”

It was Loona’s turn to be silent. She hadn’t actually fully heard what Bee had to say, but even with half of the statement, she didn’t like how it began to sound. A very primal fear had reared its ugly head.

“Bee, listen,” gulped Loona, a sweat beginning to form. She chose her next words carefully; “Whatever you’re thinking, I’m not. I get what you’re saying, but whatever you’re thinking is unfounded. There’s nothing going on you need to concern yourself with.”

The silence was loud, but so too was the stomping rumble of thunder somewhere to the west. Whatever Bee was doing, which more likely than not was barely anything at all, it didn’t bode

favourably. What was the Lee-Enfield going to do anyway? Loona readied herself for whatever was to come. She knew her words from moments before were going to dictate exactly what.

What came was a gentle exhale through nostrils. Bee was relieving something internal, like steam leaving a chamber. Then she spoke quietly, slow and methodical; “I’ve always thought favourably of ya, girl. Ever since I met ya with ‘Tex. You’re really, really something. But see, ya need to tread a little more carefully. Ya might accidentally show ya true self.”

Just as Loona tried to get to grips as to what this meant, something happened with her vision. It was subtle and slow, but she felt more eyes form from underneath her main ones. When she realised what was happening, Loona gasped and staggered back, dropping the rifle with a loud clatter on the wooden floorboards.

Hyperventilating she tried her hardest, her very hardest to prevent herself from changing into the *feral beast* she knew she’d become. Her footing gave way from underneath her and she collapsed to the ground, shaking and burning up with a fever, begging for it all to stop. Every passing second Loona felt like she could split apart, her muscles burning like fire and an intense, uncontrolled fury along with it. Writhing around on the long carpet overlaying the cold timber floor, Loona braced herself for what was now certain to happen...

But it never came. The extra smaller eyes disappeared, leaving the hound with two again. All the pain and feelings out of her control vanished just like that.

“See,” Bee hummed through the door; “What did I tell ya?”

Inside the house the hound’s head was pounding, all of what she had having been put into keeping her form at bay. “Get the FUCK outta here, you PSYCHO,” Loona wheezed breathlessly, feeling incredibly weak at the knees. Any moment she could collapse.

And so the sin did. Loona heard the creaking of footsteps departing from beyond the door, across the verandah, down the stairs, and onto the sodden ground. The visitor said nothing else. Once more thunder and lightning rolled audibly.

With danger gone, Loona sputtered to catch her breath as she staggered back onto her feet, making use of Jim’s Lee-Enfield as a makeshift crutch to balance herself back out. This was one encounter the goth really wished was a dream.

She heard Silvio Dante from the television, doing his best impression of The Godfather; ***“Just as I thought I was out… they pull me back in!”***

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